

ESSAY

MY REMINISCENCES

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Contents

The Painter Of Memory	3
The Beginning Of Learning	6
Home And The World Outside	8
The Rule Of The Servants	18
Normal School.....	22
The Beginning Of Poetry-Writing	25
The Provision Of Various Learning	27
Journey Outward	32
The Practice Of Poetic Composition.....	35
Srikanth Babu	38
The End Of Bengali Instruction	42
Father	50
Journey To The Himalayas	56
Return	71
Lessons At Home	78
The Household Atmosphere.....	82
Akshay Chandra Chowdhury	88
Song-Making	90
Companion Of Literature	92
The Publication Of Writings	95
The Poems Of Bhanusingha.....	97
Love Of Country.....	99
Bharati	105

Ahmedabad.....	109
England.....	111
Loken Palit.....	123
Bhagnahriday.....	125
English Music.....	132
Valmiki-Pratibha	135
Evening Songs.....	140
An Essay Concerning Song.....	144
The Banks Of The Ganges	148
Priya Babu	152
Morning Songs	153
Rajendralal Mitra.....	163
Carwar	166
Nature's Revenge.....	170
Pictures And Songs	173
The Boy	175
Bankim Babu.....	178
The Ship's Hull	182
Death's Grief.....	184
Rain And Autumn	189
Shri Ashutosh Chowdhury	192
Sharps And Flats	194

THE PAINTER OF MEMORY

Upon what canvas the pictures of a life are painted, I do not know. But whoever the painter may be, it is pictures that he paints. That is to say, he sits not with brush in hand intent upon preserving an exact copy of all that has occurred. According to his own inclination he leaves out this and keeps that; he makes small what was great, and great what was small. He has not the least hesitation in placing before what came after, and after what came before. In truth, his business is picture-making, not history-writing.

Thus, on the outer side of life the stream of events has flowed on, while on the inner side, picture after picture has continued to be painted. Between the two there is a connection, and yet the two are not quite the same.

We have no leisure to look properly at this inner picture-gallery of ours. From moment to moment our glance falls upon one or another portion of it. But the greater part of it lies fallen into darkness, out of sight. The painter who paints unceasingly—why he paints, no one can say, nor in what gallery these pictures will be hung when his painting is finally done.

Some years ago, someone having asked me to speak of the events of my life, I went once to take stock of this picture-chamber. I had thought I should gather together, roughly and summarily, two or four items of my life's history, and be done with it. But when I opened the door and looked, I found that the memory of a life is not the history of that life—it is the handiwork of some invisible painter. The many colours that have fallen here and there upon it are not reflections from without—those colours are from his own store; he has had to grind them in his own liquid. Therefore, the impression that has fallen upon the canvas will not serve as testimony in a court of law.

In this treasury of memory the attempt to gather history with any real exactness may well fail utterly; but there is an intoxication in looking at pictures, and that intoxication took hold of me. When the traveller is walking upon a road, or lodging in a wayside inn, that road or that inn is not, to him, a picture—it is then something exceedingly necessary and exceedingly immediate. Only when the need is spent, when the traveller has passed beyond it, does it show itself as a picture. The towns and fields, the rivers and hills, through which one has had to pass in the morning of life—when, in the evening, before entering the resting-place, one turns to look back upon them, in the light of the approaching close of day the whole of it appears as a single picture. When the leisure came to look back upon that picture, when once I turned to gaze in that direction, my mind became wholly absorbed in it.

Is the curiosity that arose in my mind merely the natural attachment one feels for one's own past life? Doubtless some measure of affection cannot but be present; but a picture, simply because it is a picture, has its own attraction. It is not wholly true that the pictures which Lakshmana set before Sita for her diversion, in the first act of the Uttararamacharita, were pleasing to her only because of their connection with her own life.

There is nothing in this memoir worthy of being preserved as unforgettable. But literature does not depend for its worth upon the dignity of its subject; whatever one has felt deeply, if one can render it into something that others too may feel, finds favour with mankind. Whatever has taken shape as a picture within one's own memory—if that can be made to take shape in words, it becomes worthy of a place in literature.

These memory-pictures too are of that same order of literary material. It would be a mistake to accept this as an attempt to write a life's history. Judged by that standard, this writing is utterly incomplete and unnecessary.

THE BEGINNING OF LEARNING

"Then came the rain, the frogs began to croak"—this was the first poem in my life's history of primal poets. Even now, when the joy of that day comes back to me, I understand why the thing called rhyme is so necessary in poetry. Because there is rhyme, the sentence, though finished, is not finished—when its meaning is exhausted, its resonance is not yet exhausted; taking hold of the rhyme, a play goes on between ear and mind. Turning thus, again and again, on that day my whole being felt as though water were falling and leaves were stirring within it. That dark-complexioned Kailash Mukherjee, in my childhood, used to entertain me by reciting, at tremendous speed, some long doggerel rhyme. I was the hero of that rhyme, and in it was described, in the most vivid terms, the unfailing hope of union with a certain prospective heroine. As this world-enchanting bride sat radiant in fate's lap, my mind, listening to the rhyme, grew most eager to see her picture. The catalogue of costly ornaments with which she was adorned from head to foot, and the description of the unprecedented pomp of the wedding festivities, might well have stirred the minds of many a grave and sober elder—but what set the boy's mind dancing, what let him see before his eyes strange and beautiful pictures of many colours, was, at its root, that swiftly-uttered, unbroken cascade of sound and the swing of the metre. These two memories of childhood's literary pleasure still remain awake in me—and I recall too, "The rain falls pit-a-pat, the river is in flood"—that rhyme was, as it were, the Meghadut of my infancy.

Through the force of tears, I was admitted early to the Oriental Seminary. What I learnt there I do not remember, but one method of discipline I do recall. If a boy could not recite his lesson, he was made to stand by the bench and a number of slates from the class were piled upon his two outstretched hands and pressed down together. Whether such a practice could implant the power of retention from without into the mind within is a matter for psychologists to determine.

One day it had turned cloudy; I was playing in the long veranda by the roadside of our outer house. I do not recall for what true reason someone, to frighten me,

suddenly began calling out "Policeman! Policeman!" I had a fairly rough-and-ready notion of what a policeman's duty was. I knew that the moment a man was called a criminal and handed over to them, it was the natural function of a police officer to seize the wretch and make him vanish into the fathomless depths of the police station, exactly as a crocodile impales its prey upon its serrated teeth and disappears beneath the water. Unable to fathom where deliverance for an innocent boy might lie from so merciless a system of punishment, I fled straight to the inner apartments; the terror that they were pursuing behind me made my whole back shrink and crawl. I ran to my mother and told her of my impending danger; this did not appear to rouse in her any particular alarm. But I did not feel it safe to go outside. My grandmother—some relation of my mother's, who used to read Krittibas's Ramayana—that soiled, dog-eared, marble-paper-covered book I took upon my lap and sat down to read by the door of my mother's room. Before me, encircling the inner courtyard, ran the four-cornered veranda; upon that veranda the pale afternoon light was falling from a clouded sky. Seeing tears fall from my eyes at some pathetic passage of the Ramayana, my grandmother forcibly snatched the book from my hand and took it away.

HOME AND THE WORLD OUTSIDE

In our childhood there was scarcely any provision for luxury—one might say none at all. On the whole, the life of that time was far simpler than that of today; seeing the paraphernalia by which today's gentleman maintains his dignity, that earlier age would, in shame, wish to disown all kinship with it. This, then, was the special character of that age; and beyond this, in our house particularly, there was no excessive fuss made over the children at all. Indeed, the business of pampering is really for the entertainment of the guardians themselves—for children, such indulgence is no blessing at all.

We were under the rule of the servants alone. To simplify their own duties, they had virtually put a stop to our movements. However rigid the bondage might be in that respect, neglect is itself a kind of great freedom—within that freedom our minds were free. Our inner being was not gripped from every side by the tyranny of feeding and dressing, of decking and adorning.

We had not even a whiff of luxury in our food. Our clothing was so exceedingly modest that a modern boy might well feel his honour compromised were its inventory recited before him. Before crossing the threshold of our tenth year, we never, for any reason whatsoever, wore socks. In winter one white shirt over another sufficed. For this I have never once blamed fate. Only, when Neyamat Khalifa, our family tailor, neglecting his duty, judged the addition of pockets to our shirts unnecessary, I would feel a certain hurt—for such a boy was born in no pauper's house; he possessed not the least property, movable or immovable, to keep in a pocket; by divine grace, in the matter of a child's wealth, there is not much to distinguish the rich man's house from the poor man's. We had one pair of slippers each, but our feet never quite stayed where the slippers were. At every step I would fling them forward ahead of me—so that in coming and going, the slippers travelled far more than the feet, and the very purpose of footwear was defeated at every stride.

Those older than we were—their manner of life, their dress, their food and recreation, their comforts and amusements, their talk and discourse—all this lay far, far beyond our reach. We caught a hint of it, but never got hold of it. In these days children have made light of their elders; nowhere do they meet with any real check, and without even asking, they get everything. We got nothing so easily. Even the most trifling articles were, for us, hard to come by; with the hope that someday, on growing up, we might obtain them, we would consign them to the custody of a distant future. The result was this: whatever little we did get, we extracted from it every last drop of its flavour, wasting nothing from husk to kernel. I see the children of well-to-do households nowadays; because they get everything so easily, they take one bite out of twelve and throw the rest away—most of their world is simply wasted upon them, spoiled by sheer excess.

In the outer house, in the room on the south-east corner of the upper storey, in the quarters of the servants, our days used to pass.

We had a servant named Shyam. Shyam was a dark, sturdy boy, with long hair on his head, whose home was in Khulna district. He would seat me in a particular spot in the room and, taking a piece of chalk, draw a circle all around me. With grave countenance, raising a warning finger, he would declare that dire peril awaited whoever stepped outside that circle. Whether the peril was of this world or the other I could not clearly make out, but a great fear settled in my mind nonetheless. I had read in the Ramayana what utter ruin befell Sita when she crossed the line—and so I could not dismiss that circle as altogether unworthy of belief.

Just beneath the window was a pond with bathing-steps of turf. On its eastern bank, against the wall, stood an immense China banyan tree; on the south side, a row of coconut palms. A prisoner within Shyam's circle, I would open the window shutters and spend almost the entire day gazing at that pond as though it were a picture in a book. From morning I would watch the neighbours arriving one by one to bathe. I knew who would come at what hour. I was familiar even with each one's

particular manner of bathing. One would press both ears with his fingers and, with a swift succession of "flup, flup," take his dives in quick order and go away; another, without diving at all, would pour water over his head again and again from a towel; another, to clear away the surface scum, would repeatedly sweep the water aside with both hands before suddenly, all at once, plunging under with a sharp motion; another, without the least preamble, would leap straight from the topmost step into the water with a great splash, surrendering himself entirely; another, while wading in, would recite a whole string of hymns in a single breath; another, in haste, was anxious to finish his bath somehow and hurry home; while yet another, with not the slightest trace of hurry, would bathe leisurely, dry himself, change his clothes, shake out the fold of his cloth two or three times, pluck a few flowers from the garden, and then, with slow, swaying gait, scattering into the air the coolness of his bath-refreshed body, set off homeward, humming softly to himself. Thus the noon would strike, one o'clock would come. Gradually the bathing-ghat would empty and fall silent. Only the swans and ducks would go on diving all day long to bring up snails, and, moving their beaks busily, keep preening the feathers of their backs.

Once the pond fell empty of people, the shade beneath that banyan tree would take possession of my whole mind. Down its trunk hung numerous aerial roots, creating on every side a dark and tangled maze. Within that gloom, some one obscure corner of the universe seemed, as though by an error, to have escaped the ordinary laws of the world. By some accident, there seemed to linger there, even now, in the very midst of daylight, a realm of impossibility from some age of dreams, having somehow slipped past the Creator's eye. Whom I used to see there in my mind's eye, and what manner of doings were theirs, it is impossible today to say in any clear language. It was to this very banyan tree that I addressed a poem written many years later:

"Day and night you stand, matted locks upon your head,
Do you remember still, O ancient banyan, the small boy who once played?"

But alas, where is that tree now! The pond that was once the mirror of this great tree's presiding deity exists no more; and those who used to bathe there have themselves, many of them, followed into the shadow of that vanished banyan. And that boy, grown to manhood, now lets down on every side of himself various kinds of aerial roots, and amid vast entanglements keeps count of the play of sunshine and shadow through days good and ill.

We were forbidden to go outside the house; indeed, even within the house we could not move about wherever we pleased. For that reason we came to see the whole of nature only through screens and partitions. There existed a thing called "outside," an infinitely extended substance beyond my reach, and yet its form, its sound, its scent, would come touching me suddenly, this way and that, through the various chinks and crevices of doors and windows. It was as though, across the bars, it made many playful overtures to draw me into a game with it. It was free; I was bound—there was no means of union, and therefore the attraction of that courtship was intense. Today the bamboo bars of that circle have been wiped away, but the circle itself has not yet quite vanished. The distant is still distant; the outside is still outside. I recall now a poem I wrote when grown:

The caged bird was in a cage of gold,
The forest bird was in the forest.
Once, by what chance, the two came to meet—
What was in the Creator's mind?
The forest bird says, "Caged bird, come,
Let us go together to the forest."
The caged bird says, "Forest bird, come,
Let us dwell together in the cage."
The forest bird says, "No,
I will never submit to be chained."

The caged bird says, "Alas,
How shall I ever come out into the forest?"

The wall enclosing the terrace at the back of our house rose above my head. When I had grown a little older, and the servants' discipline had somewhat relaxed, when a new bride had come into the household and I had begun, as her playfellow, to enjoy her indulgence, on certain days at noon I would come up to that terrace. By then everyone in the house had finished their meal; the household chores had come to a pause; the inner apartments lay sunk in rest; the bathed saris hung drying over the terrace cornices; upon the leftover rice thrown into a corner of the courtyard, an assembly of crows had settled. In that solitary leisure, from within the crevice of the wall, an acquaintance would strike up, beak to beak, between this caged bird and that bird of the forest. Standing and gazing, I would remain lost in thought—my eyes falling upon the coconut-palm row at the edge of our inner garden; through its gaps could be seen a pond of the "Sindur Bagan" quarter, and, by that pond's edge, the cowshed of the milkwoman Tara who supplied us our milk; further off still could be seen, mingling with the tree-tops, the rows of high and low roofs of Calcutta of every shape and size, spreading white and dazzling under the noonday sun before vanishing into the pale bluish haze of the eastern horizon. On the roofs of those far-off houses one or another attic-room would stand raised; it seemed to me they were, with silent, upraised finger and a wink of the eye, trying to convey to me in secret signal something of the mystery held within. As a beggar standing outside a palace fancies impossible jewels and riches within the closed coffers of the royal treasury, so I too used to imagine those unknown houses filled with I know not what freedoms and what games. Overhead spread the sky's vast noon-brightness, from whose farthest edge the kite's thin, sharp cry came to my ears; and along the lane by the Sindur Bagan, past the day-silent, sleeping houses, a hawker's voice would go singing out its cry—"Bangles! Bangles for sale! Toys, toys for sale!"—and this would fill my whole heart with a strange, wistful longing.

My father used to travel about a great deal, seldom staying at home. His third-floor room would remain locked. Opening the shutters and slipping my hand through, drawing back the bolt, I would open the door; and on the south side of his room

there was a sofa—upon this I would sit quietly, and thus my noon would pass. To begin with, it was a room long closed, forbidden to enter; in that room there seemed to hang some dense fragrance of mystery. Beyond, upon the empty, open terrace in front, the sun would blaze fiercely, and this too would fill my mind with a wistful yearning. And there was yet another attraction besides. At that time the city's water-supply had only just been installed. In those days the new grandeur of civic amenity had not yet begun to practise its parsimony even in the Bengali quarters of the town—its generosity extended equally to north and south of the city. In that golden age of the water-works, even my father's third-floor bathroom received its supply. Opening the shower-tap, I would bathe alone at odd hours to my heart's content. That bathing was not for comfort's sake—it was purely for the sake of giving free rein to caprice. On one side, freedom; on the other, the fear of restraint—between these two, the Municipal Company's stream of water rained down pure delight into my mind.

However rare the touch of the outer world might be for me, perhaps for that very reason the joy of the outer world came the more easily to me. When means are abundant, the mind grows indolent; it comes to rely wholly upon what lies without, and forgets that in the feast of joy, the inner ceremony is of greater moment than the outer. This is the very first lesson that a human being learns in childhood. Then his resources are scant and trivial, but for the attainment of joy he needs nothing more than this. The unfortunate child who, in this world, gets more of playthings than he needs, finds his play itself turned to ashes.

The garden we had within our house—to call it a garden is to claim rather more than the truth. A citron tree, a jujube tree, a foreign hog-plum, and a row of coconut palms made up its chief company. In the middle stood a round, paved platform. In the cracks of its paving, grass and various weeds, without so much as asking leave, had planted the flag of squatter's rights. Those flowering shrubs that would not consent to die even from neglect went on, without bringing any complaint against the gardener in name, quietly performing their duty to the best of their power. In the north corner stood a husking-shed, where, now and then, for household needs, the ladies of the inner apartments would gather. In Calcutta, that husking-shed,

acknowledging the complete defeat of rural life, has since some unrecorded day silently veiled its face and vanished. That the first man Adam's garden of Eden was more richly furnished than this garden of ours, I do not believe. For the first man's paradise was without covering—he had not yet smothered himself under a weight of arrangement. It is only since eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge, and until that fruit is wholly digested, that man's need for adornment has gone on increasing without end. The garden within our house was that paradise garden of mine—it was enough for me. I remember well: at daybreak in autumn, the moment sleep broke, I would come straight to this garden. A scent of dew-laden grass and leaves would come wafting to greet me, and the soft, fresh morning sunlight, entering beneath the trembling fringe of coconut fronds along our eastern wall, would fall open-mouthed upon the dawn.

In the northern part of our house lay another patch of ground, which to this day we call the Golabari—the granary-yard. This name proves that at some ancient time grain used to be stored there in granaries for the year's provision—when town and village still bore much the same face, like sisters of similar age; now it is hard to find any resemblance between the elder sister and her brother.

On holidays, whenever I found the chance, I would go and present myself at this Golabari. To say I went there to play would not be quite right. My attachment was to the place itself, more than to any game. What the reason was, it is hard to say. Perhaps, being a secluded and desolate corner of the house, it held for me a certain mystery of its own. It was not our dwelling-place, not a room in use; it served no purpose whatsoever; it was outside the house proper, and bore upon it no mark of daily necessity; it was uncomely, unneeded, waste ground—no one had even planted a flowering shrub there—and it was for this very reason that, in that untenanted spot, a boy's imagination met with no obstacle to its free play. Whatever day I managed, through some small gap in the guards' vigilance, to reach that place, that day alone seemed to me a true holiday.

There was yet another place in the house whose location I have never to this day been able to discover. A girl of my own age, my playmate, used to call it the "King's House." Sometimes I would hear from her, "I went there today." But never once did such good fortune fall to me that I too might follow in her steps. It was, apparently, a wonderful place; there the games too were as wonderful, and the playthings quite without parallel. It seemed to me that it lay quite nearby; on the ground floor, or perhaps on the first floor, in some particular spot—but somehow, no matter what, I never managed to get there. Many times I asked the girl whether the King's House lay outside our own house. She said, no, it was within this very house. I would sit astonished and think: I have seen every single room of this house, yet where, then, is that room! Who this King might be, I never once thought to ask; where his kingdom lay has remained undiscovered to this very day—only this much have I gathered, that within our own house lies that King's house.

When one looks back towards childhood, the thing that comes to mind above all else is that then the world and life itself were brimful of mystery. That everywhere there existed something not yet imagined, and that there was no telling when one might come upon it—this thought would rise fresh in the mind every day. It was as though Nature, with closed fist, laughed and asked: "Guess what I have here." What might prove impossible, I could never say for certain.

I remember well—in one corner of the southern veranda I had planted a custard-apple seed, and would water it every day. That from this very seed a tree might spring gave rise in me to no small wonder and eagerness. Even now sprouts come up from custard-apple seeds, but along with that fact, no wonder any longer rises in the mind. That is no fault of the custard-apple seed—it is a fault of the mind itself. Having stolen stones from the rockery in our uncle's garden, we set about, in one corner of our reading-room, to build a mock mountain—and in its crevices, here and there, planted saplings of flowering shrubs, tormenting them so much with the excess of our attentions that, being mere trees and helpless to protest, they would simply keep quiet and lose no time in dying. Words cannot express what joy and what wonder we felt over that mountain. We firmly believed that our creation must surely be a thing of astonishment even to our elders; and the very

day we put that belief to the test, that very day our household mountain, together with all its vegetation, vanished from existence. That the corner of a schoolroom was no fit foundation for mountain-building was a lesson learnt so suddenly, so roughly, that I felt deeply wounded. Remembering how vast was the gulf between our make-believe and the wishes of our elders, the removed weight of that stony foundation came and settled heavily upon our minds.

I remember, in those days, how dense with meaning this world of matter was. What earth, what water, what trees and plants, what sky—all of it spoke; it would in no wise let the mind remain indifferent. That we were seeing the earth only on its outer surface, and could not see into its inner depths—how long this thought went on jolting the mind, I cannot say. What plan I did not devise for how the earth's brownish outer cover might be stripped away and cast off! I would think: if one bamboo pole after another were driven down, deeper and deeper, in this way, once enough bamboos had been driven in, perhaps the very deepest depth of the earth might somehow be reached. On the occasion of the Magh Festival, poles of wood used to be set up in rows all around our courtyard, and from them chandeliers hung. From the first day of Magh, for this purpose, earth would begin to be dug in the courtyard. Everywhere, the beginning of festival preparations is a thing of great excitement to children. But to me, this business of digging earth held a special fascination all its own. Though every year I had seen earth being dug—had seen the whole of mankind, as the pit grew deeper and deeper, gradually sinking beneath the surface of the ground—and though nothing had ever appeared in it that could enable any prince, or any minister's son, to make his successful journey to the netherworld, still, every single time, it seemed to me that a chest of mysteries was about to be opened. It seemed that just a little more digging would do it—but year after year passed, and that "little more" was never dug. The curtain would be tugged a little, but never quite drawn back. I would think: surely the grown-ups could, if only they wished, bring everything to light—why then do they stop and remain content with so shallow a probing? Had a child's command like mine held any force, the deepest secret of the earth would not have lain thus carelessly buried under earth. And wherever the blue of the sky lay, and behind that blue the whole mystery of the heavens—that thought too kept nudging the mind. The day the schoolmaster, in the course of teaching the Bodhoday, said that the sky's blue

dome was nothing but an optical illusion, what an impossible wonder that seemed! He said, "Set up ladder upon ladder and climb up—you will find your head touch nothing anywhere." I thought he must be being needlessly stingy about the number of ladders. I kept raising my voice, saying, more ladders, more ladders, more ladders; and when at last it became clear that increasing the number of ladders was of no use, I sat back astonished, and thought to myself that this was such an astonishing piece of news that only schoolmasters in this world could possibly know it—no one else at all.

THE RULE OF THE SERVANTS

In the history of India, the reigns of the slave-kings were not happy times. In the history of my own life too, when I look back on the period of the servants' rule, I find in it neither grandeur nor joy. These rulers changed frequently, but our fortune never varied in the matter of prohibition and blows. At the time, I had no leisure to reflect upon the theory of the matter—whatever fell upon my back, I took upon my back, and accepted in my mind that this was simply the way of the world: that the elder beats, and the younger must be beaten. It took a very long time before I learnt the contrary truth—namely, that it is the younger who ought to beat, and the elder who ought to be beaten.

Which bird is bad and which is virtuous, the hunter does not judge from the bird's point of view, but from his own. That is why, if a wary bird, sensing danger before the shot is fired, screams and scatters the flock, the hunter curses it. When we cried after being struck, the one who struck us never conceded that this was any fitting response. Indeed, that was, in the eyes of the servant-kings, outright sedition. I remember well that in order to suppress that sedition entirely, attempts were made to drown our crying in great jars kept filled with water. Crying is a thing extremely disagreeable and inconvenient to one who administers punishment—no one can deny this.

Now and then I wonder why we received such merciless treatment at the hands of the servants. On the whole, I cannot claim that in temperament and manner we were unworthy of affection and tenderness. The real reason was this: the servants bore complete responsibility for us. Complete responsibility is a very heavy thing to bear. It is unbearable even for one's own kin. If a small child is allowed to be simply a small child—if he is permitted to play, to run about, to satisfy his curiosity—then he becomes manageable enough. But suppose one resolves: I shall not let him go out, I shall stop his play, I shall make him sit still and quiet—then one creates an exceedingly difficult problem indeed. In that case, the burden that a child otherwise bears effortlessly for himself falls upon the one who governs him.

It is as though a horse, instead of being allowed to walk on the ground, is carried about upon someone's shoulders. The poor fellow who must carry it can hardly keep his temper even. A man may bear a burden on his shoulder for wages, but he will find every occasion to take his revenge upon the poor horse.

Of most of our childhood governors, only a vague, indistinct impression remains—nothing more. Of one alone the memory still stands out quite clearly.

His name was Ishwar. He had formerly been a village schoolmaster. He was an exceedingly pure, disciplined, learned man of grave temperament, strict in his observances. In this world, the material—the earth and water—suited to the preservation of his purity was in woefully short supply. For this reason he had, as it were, to wage a perpetual battle against the impurity of this clay-built earth. In a fit of caution he would draw water for himself from three or four hands' depth below the pond's surface, sinking the pitcher deep. At bathing-time he would spend a long while sweeping the upper layer of the pond's water aside with both hands before, suddenly, in one swift motion, plunging under—as though his intention were to somehow catch the pond off its guard, to deceive it and dip his head before it noticed. While walking, his right hand would hold itself so curiously aloof and crooked from his body that one could plainly see his right hand did not quite trust even his own clothes. Into every crevice of water, land, sky, and human dealings, countless impurities had, in his view, crept and lodged themselves, and to go on scouring them out, day and night, was his one great, arduous discipline. That the whole universe should, from any quarter whatsoever, come and touch his person, was, to him, unbearable. His dignity was unfathomable. He would speak slowly, deliberately, his neck tilted a little to one side, chewing over each word as he uttered it. The elders of our household would often laugh behind his back at his fondness for the elevated, literary idiom. There was a story current in our house about him—that he pronounced Baranagar as Barahnagar. This might well be mere hearsay; but I know for a fact that instead of saying, "So-and-so is sitting there," he would say, "So-and-so is in a state of waiting." This use of the literary form in his speech remained, for a long time, a stock item in our family's store of jokes. Certainly, in these days, if a servant in a respectable household said "is in a state of

waiting," it would sound nothing out of the ordinary. From this we may see that in Bengali, the language of books has been gradually descending towards the spoken tongue, and the spoken tongue rising towards the language of books—what was once a gulf as wide as heaven from earth between the two is, day by day, being closed.

This same erstwhile schoolmaster hit upon a method of keeping us subdued and quiet in the evenings. In the evening, seated around a broken lamp burning castor oil, he would recite to us from the Ramayana and Mahabharata. Two or four more listeners from among the servants would come and join in. In the dim light, huge shadows would fall right up to the rafters of the room; lizards clung to the walls catching insects; bats wheeled continuously outside on the veranda like frenzied dervishes; we would sit perfectly still, mouths agape, listening. The evening when the tale of Kushilava came round, when the young heroes set about utterly demolishing their own father and uncles, how filled with a hushed and breathless suspense that gathering, in the dim light of that evening, had grown—I remember it even now. Meanwhile night was drawing on, our permitted hour of wakefulness was fast running out, but the story's conclusion was still far off. At this critical juncture, our father's attendant, young Kishori Chattopadhyay, would come and, singing Dasharathi's Panchali, complete the remaining portion at breakneck speed—and into what limbo vanished the gentle, murmuring cadence of Krittibas's simple couplets! Under the din and clatter of alliteration, we would be left utterly stupefied.

Some days, when discussion of the ancient legends arose, disputes over scriptural fine points would break out among the assembled listeners, and Ishwar would settle them with profound erudition. Although, being a servant to small children, he ranked low among the domestics in matters of status, still, like Bhishma the grandsire presiding over the court of the Kurus, he kept his own dignity as an elder unshaken even while seated in a lowlier place than his juniors.

This most learned of our guardians did have one weakness, which, in the interest of historical truth, must reluctantly be disclosed. He took opium. For this reason he had particular need of nourishing food. And so, when he brought before us our allotted portion of milk, in that milk the force of attraction proved, in his mind, considerably stronger than the force of repulsion. When we, quite naturally, expressed our distaste for drinking milk, he never once, even for the sake of fulfilling his charge over our health, pressed us a second time or used force.

He was likewise most exceedingly scrupulous where our breakfast was concerned. We would sit down to eat. A stack of luchis would be piled before us on a thick wooden platter. At first he would rain down upon our plates only one or two luchis, only just high enough to preserve propriety. Like the boon a man wrests, against the reluctance of the gods, purely through the force of severe austerity, that stack of luchis would come and fall upon our plates; in it, the server's right hand betrayed not the least generosity. After that Ishwar would ask whether more was wanted. I knew which answer would seem, to him, most satisfactory of all. I had no wish to deprive him by asking a second time for luchis. From the bazaar, the money allotted for our breakfast Ishwar himself received. What we wished to eat, he would ask us each day. I knew that if I ordered cheap things, he would be pleased. Sometimes I would order puffed rice and the like, light fare; sometimes fried gram, roasted peanuts, and other indigestible things. I noticed that where scriptural rules, dietary theory, and the like were concerned, his zeal for fine distinctions was as strong as ever—but concerning what was wholesome or unwholesome for us, he showed no such precision at all.

NORMAL SCHOOL

While I was studying at the Oriental Seminary, I devised a means of ridding myself of the indignity of being merely a pupil among others. In one particular corner of our veranda, I too opened a class of my own. The railings were my pupils. Taking a stick in hand and a chair to sit upon, I would seat myself before them and play at schoolmastering. Among the railings, which were the good boys and which the bad had been settled once and for all. Indeed, I could quite clearly perceive the difference in countenance between the well-behaved railing and the wicked railing, the clever railing and the stupid one. Upon the wicked railings my stick fell so continuously and so often that, had they possessed life, they would gladly have given it up to gain some peace. The more disfigured they became under the blows, the more my anger against them only grew; I could never quite work out what would suffice to give them proper punishment. What terrible schoolmastering I practised upon that silent class of mine, there remains today no witness left to testify. In place of my wooden pupils of those days, iron railings now stand filled in their stead—our successors have to this day taken up no responsibility for their instruction, nor, even had they done so, would it under the discipline of that time have produced any effect at all. This I have clearly observed: that pupils are often slow to learn what a teacher deliberately teaches them, but they suffer no such difficulty at all in picking up a teacher's temperament. Whatever injustice, impatience, anger, and partiality attended the business of instruction, I absorbed far more readily than any other lesson taught. It was fortunate that, apart from something as utterly mute and immobile as wooden railings, I had, in that helpless age, no means of practising such barbarity upon anything else. But though there was a vast difference in rank between the class of railings and the class of pupils, between me and the narrow-minded schoolmaster there was not the least difference of mentality.

I do not believe I stayed very long at the Oriental Seminary. After that I was admitted to the Normal School. My age then was very tender. One thing I recall: at the very start of the school's daily proceedings, all the boys would sit in the gallery and recite, in a sing-song tone, some sort of verses. Doubtless there was some

intention that, alongside instruction, some measure of entertainment for the children should be provided at the very outset of the school day. But the words of the song were in English, and the tune too was thoroughly incongruous—we understood nothing whatsoever of what mantra we were chanting or what rite we were performing. To join, day after day, in this meaningless, monotonous business, was no pleasure to us at all. Yet the authorities of the school, holding fast to some theory of the time, remained quite convinced that they were providing the children with enjoyment; to actually look at the children and judge the result seemed to them wholly superfluous. It was as though, by their theory, deriving pleasure was the children's duty, and failing to derive it, their fault. And so, having gathered their theory from some English book, they felt at ease simply lifting a whole English song straight out of it. Into what language that English got transformed in our mouths would, no doubt, be of considerable interest to philologists. Only one line I still remember:

"Coloki puloki singil melaling, melaling, melaling."

After much deliberation I have managed to recover the original of part of this—though what transformation of what word "coloki" represents, I have to this day failed to work out. The rest, I believe, was:

Full of glee, singing merrily, merrily, merrily.

As the memory of the Normal School gradually passes from its hazy state into sharper focus, it becomes, in no part, in the least degree sweet. Had I been able to mix freely with the other boys, the misery of schooling would not have felt so unbearable. But that never came to pass at all. The company of most of the boys was so coarse and degrading that during recess I would take a servant and go sit alone by a window overlooking the street on the upper floor, passing the time there. I would calculate to myself: one year, two years, three years—how many more years must I endure like this. Among the teachers I remember one in

particular, whose language was so foul that, out of sheer disrespect, I would not answer any question of his at all. For an entire year I sat silent at the very back of his class, among all the pupils. When lessons were in progress, I would use that leisure to attempt the solution of many a difficult problem of the world. I remember one such problem. How, being without weapons, one might yet defeat an enemy in battle—that was a matter of deep contemplation for me. Sitting amid the drone of that classroom's lessons, I would ponder that question in my mind—I remember it even now. I would think: if fierce beasts such as dogs and tigers were first thoroughly tamed and trained, and arranged in ranks two or three deep on the battlefield, then the opening act of the contest would form itself easily enough; after that, once one's own strength were brought to bear, victory would be no impossible matter. Whenever, in my mind, I pictured this exceedingly simple scheme of military arrangement, I could see my own side's victory in battle as an absolute certainty. When there was no real task at hand, I would devise many wonderfully simple solutions to problems. But when it came to actually performing a task, I found that what was hard remained hard, what was difficult remained difficult—there was, admittedly, some inconvenience in this, but the attempt to make things easy only multiplied the inconvenience sevenfold.

In this way, when a year had passed in that class, our annual examination in Bengali was held before Madhusudan Bachaspati. I received more marks than any other boy. Our class teacher informed the higher authorities that the examiner had shown partiality towards me. A second examination was held. This time the Superintendent himself sat with a chair beside the examiner. Once again, by good fortune, I obtained a high rank.

THE BEGINNING OF POETRY-WRITING

At that time my age could not have been more than seven or eight. My nephew, Jyotiprakash, was a good deal older than I. He had by then entered upon English literature, and was reciting, with great enthusiasm, Hamlet's soliloquies. Why he should have suddenly taken it into his head to make me, a mere child, write poetry, I cannot say. One day, at noon, he called me into his room and said, "You must write verse." So saying, he explained to me the rules of the fourteen-syllable couplet and the joining of rhymes.

Verse, up to that point, I had seen only in printed books. No crossing-out, no revision, not the slightest sign of any mortal frailty was to be found in it anywhere. That this verse could actually be attempted and written by oneself—even to imagine such a thing required more courage than I possessed. One day a thief had been caught in our house. In great fear, yet with intense curiosity, I went to see him. I found he was quite an ordinary-looking man, like anyone else. In such a state, when the doorkeeper began to beat him, my heart ached greatly. My feelings about poetry underwent much the same transformation. The moment I had, with my own hand, cobbled a few words together into a rhyming couplet, the whole mystique surrounding the composition of verse dissolved at once. Now I see that even poor Verse cannot bear too many blows either. Often one feels pity, yet the beating cannot be stopped—one's hand simply itches to strike. Never has a thief's back suffered so many houses' worth of blows as poor Verse's has.

Once fear was thus broken, who could hold it back any longer? Through the kindness of some clerk, I procured an exercise-book of blue paper. In it, with my own hand, ruling a number of uneven lines in pencil, I began to write verse in large, unformed letters.

Just as a young deer, when its new antlers begin to sprout, goes about butting anything and everything wherever it finds itself, so I, with my newly sprouted poetic

ambition, began creating similar havoc. My elder brother especially, taking great pride in these compositions of mine, in his enthusiasm to gather listeners, made the household's life altogether a misery. I remember one day, on the ground floor, we two brothers, having just proclaimed my poetic genius before the clerks of our estate office, were coming out together, when, at that very moment, the editor of the then "National Paper," Nabagopal Mitra, happened to set foot in our house. Instantly my brother placed him under arrest, saying, "Nabagopal Babu, Rabi has written a poem—do please listen." There was no delay in the recitation; the burden of collected poetic works had not yet grown heavy in those days. The fame of authorship could then be carried easily enough in the pocket of one's jacket. I was, at that time, all in one—writer, printer, and publisher combined. Only in the matter of advertisement did my brother lend me his assistance. I had written a poem about a bee, and, standing before the front porch, recited it aloud with great excitement to Nabagopal Babu. He smiled a little and said, "Very good—but what does the word 'dvirepha' mean?"

Dvirepha and bhramar—both mean "bee," and both are words of three syllables. Had I used the word bhramar, it would have done no harm whatsoever to the metre. Where I had gathered that difficult word from, I do not remember. Of the whole poem, it was upon that very word that my hopes rested most. Certainly, among the clerks of the estate office, that particular word had won me special credit. But even this could not shake Nabagopal Babu in the slightest. Indeed, he burst out laughing. I became firmly convinced that Nabagopal Babu was simply not a man of taste.

Never again did I recite poetry to him. Since then my age has grown considerably, but I do not think the method by which one distinguishes a man of taste from one without it has changed very much. Be that as it may—Nabagopal Babu laughed, true enough; but the word dvirepha remained lodged, unshaken, in its place, like a bee intoxicated with the nectar it has drunk.

THE PROVISION OF VARIOUS LEARNING

At that time, one of the teachers of the Normal School, the respected Nilkamal Ghoshal, taught us at home. His body was thin and dry, and his voice sharp of pitch. He gave one the impression of a slender, whip-like cane clothed in human form. From six in the morning until half past nine, our education lay in his charge. Beginning with Charupath and moving through natural history and the lives of animals, right up to Michael's Meghnadbadh Kavya, all this we studied under him. Our third uncle was especially keen that we should be instructed in a great diversity of subjects. Far more than was prescribed in school did we have to study at home. Rising while it was yet dark before dawn, and donning our loincloths, we would first wrestle with a one-eyed champion wrestler. After that, putting a shirt on over that mud-smeared body, we would learn physics, the Meghnadbadh Kavya, geometry, mathematics, history, and geography. The moment we returned from school, the drawing-master and the gymnastics-master would take charge of us. In the evening, Aghor Babu would come to teach us English. Only after nine at night, in this fashion, would we gain our release.

On Sunday mornings we had to learn singing from Bishnu. Besides this, Sarat Nath Dutta would come now and then to teach us natural science by means of apparatus and instruments. This particular instruction held special fascination for me. That when water is heated, the water at the bottom of the vessel grows thin and rises upward while the heavier water above sinks down, and it is for this reason that water bubbles and boils—the day he demonstrated this before our very eyes, placing wood-shavings in a glass vessel of water set over the fire, the wonder I felt in my mind remains vivid to me even now. That water within milk is a distinct substance, and that milk thickens because, upon heating, this water escapes in the form of vapour—the day I clearly grasped this too, I felt tremendous joy. Whatever Sunday morning he failed to come, that Sunday did not seem to me like Sunday at all.

Besides this, I began at one time to study anatomy under a student of Campbell Medical School. A human skeleton, purchased and brought by him and strung together, was hung up in our schoolroom.

Amid all this, at one point the venerable Hrambo Tattwaratna set about making us memorize, straight from "Mukundam Sacchidanandam," the elementary primer of grammar. Between the bones' names in anatomy and the aphorisms of Sanskrit grammar, I cannot rightly say which won the contest. I suspect the bones proved rather the softer of the two.

By the time our Bengali education had progressed a considerable distance, we had begun learning English. Aghor Babu, our tutor for this, was a student at Medical College. He would come in the evenings to teach us. That the discovery of fire from wood was mankind's greatest invention of all, I have read in scripture. I have no wish to dispute it. But that birds cannot light lamps in the evening—this seems to me the supreme good fortune of their fledglings. Whatever language they learn, they learn in the morning hours, and learn for the sheer joy of it—this too, I daresay, will have been noted. Though of course, it should also be remembered that theirs is not the English tongue.

This student of Medical College enjoyed such unreasonably robust health that, despite the most heartfelt wishes of his three pupils, not once did he ever have occasion to miss a lesson. Only once, when a fight broke out between the Medical College's European students and the Bengali students, did the enemy party fling a chair and crack his skull open. The event was regrettable, but at the time we could not bring ourselves to reckon our tutor's broken skull as any misfortune of our own—indeed, his recovery seemed to us unnecessarily prompt.

Evening had fallen; the rain was pouring in torrents; the road stood ankle-deep in water. Our pond had filled to the brim; the shaggy heads of the bel trees in the garden rose up above the water's surface; in the thrill of that monsoon evening my

very insides had grown thrilled like the kadamba blossom. Two or four minutes beyond our tutor's usual hour had passed. Still, one could not be certain. Chair drawn up on the veranda facing the street, I sat gazing with mournful eyes towards the turn of the lane. "Patati patre vichalati patre shankita bhavad-upayanam"—as the saying goes. At such a moment my very heart, as though suddenly stumbling, fell with a groan of despair. Fate's own mischief!—that black umbrella had appeared, borne along in the falling dusk. Could it be anyone else? No—it could not possibly be anyone else. In this vast world one might well find another soul of Bhavabhuti's temperament, but that evening, in our very lane, the appearance of a second being of our tutor's temperament was altogether beyond the realm of possibility.

When I recall it all now, I see that Aghor Babu was, in truth, by no means of that harsh, tyrannical schoolmaster breed. He never ruled us by force of arm. Even the scolding he administered by mouth held scarcely a trace of real thunder in it. But however gentle a man he might have been, his teaching hour was the evening, and his subject was English. After a whole day's misery, to light a dim lamp in the evening and set upon a Bengali boy the task of learning English—were this burden placed even upon the messenger of Death himself, he would surely seem the very Yama of torment; of this there can be no doubt. I remember well how, one day, Aghor Babu tried to prove to us that the English language was not without its charm; and to demonstrate its sweetness—whether it was verse or prose I cannot say—he recited to us, quite rapturously, some passage of English. To us it seemed exceedingly strange. We fell to laughing so hard that he was compelled that day to beat a retreat; he must have realised the case was not so simple to win—that to secure a verdict would require ten or fifteen years more of proper, hard-fought litigation.

Our tutor would, now and again, try to bring some breath of the printed page's outer freshness into our little world of study. One day he suddenly drew from his pocket a paper-wrapped mystery and declared, "Today I shall show you one of the Creator's most astonishing works." So saying, he unwrapped the parcel, drew out a human windpipe, and began explaining all its intricate mechanism. I remember

well that this gave my mind a peculiar sort of jolt. I had known that every human being speaks; but that the act of speech could be dissected into such pieces as this—such a thing had never once occurred to me. However wondrous any mechanical contrivance may be, it is, after all, never greater than the whole man himself. I did not think in quite these terms then, but my spirits sank a little; I could not, from within, share in our tutor's enthusiasm. That the true mystery of speech lies within the man himself, and not within this windpipe, was something our tutor had, it seems, somewhat forgotten in the act of dissection—and that is precisely why his explanation of the windpipe struck no proper chord in the boy's mind that day. Later still, one day, he took us to the dissection room of the Medical College. On the table lay the corpse of an old woman; the sight did not disturb my mind overmuch. But upon the floor lay a severed leg, cut off—and at that sight, my whole being gave a violent start. To see a human being thus cut into pieces seemed so monstrous, so utterly incongruous, that for many a day afterward I could not forget that black, meaningless foot lying there upon the floor.

No sooner had we somehow finished the first and second Parisian Readers than we were handed a volume of Macleod's Course of Reading. Add to this that in the evenings the body was weary and the mind bent towards the inner apartments; and then again, that book's cover was black and thick, its language harsh, and its subject matter surely held not the slightest trace of tenderness—for in that age Mother Saraswati had shown no sign whatsoever of any motherly feeling toward children. Books for boys in those days did not, as now, have pictures crowding every page. At the head of each lesson stood row upon row of tightly-bound syllables with gaps left in the spelling, brandishing the sharp bayonets of accent-marks as though preparing for the slaughter of the innocents. Beating our heads against this rocky fortress of the English language, we could accomplish absolutely nothing whatsoever. Our tutor, citing the example of some other, more diligent pupil of his, would daily rebuke us. Such comparative criticism inspired in us no affection for that boy—indeed, we felt only shame—and yet the darkness of that black book remained as impenetrable as ever. Mother Nature, taking pity upon her creatures, has planted the charm of sleep even within the dullest of substances. The very moment we began our lesson, down would nod our heads. Splashing water on our eyes, making us run about the veranda—nothing produced any lasting effect. If, by

chance, our eldest brother, passing along the schoolroom veranda, happened to catch sight of our drowsy state, he would grant us leave at once. After that, not a moment's delay was needed for sleep to vanish entirely.

JOURNEY OUTWARD

Once, when the terror of Calcutta's dengue fever drove a portion of our large household to seek refuge in the Sadhubabus' garden at Penety, we found ourselves among them.

This was my very first venture out. The riverbank of the Ganges seemed to gather me into its lap as though with the familiarity of some former birth. There, in front of the servants' quarters, stood a handful of guava trees. Sitting in their shade upon the veranda, gazing at the Ganges' current through the gaps in that little grove of guavas, my days would pass. Every morning, the very moment I woke from sleep, I would feel as though I had received the day itself like some new letter wrapped in golden paper. As if, upon breaking the seal, some wondrous news awaited discovery within. Fearful lest even the smallest particle of it be lost, I would hastily wash my face and come outside to sit in my chair. Each day, the coming and going of the tide upon the Ganges, the countless varieties of boats with their countless motions, the guava grove's shadow shifting from west to east, and beyond that dark line of forest along the far bank, the boundless golden-crimson flood of sunset piercing the sky with its brilliant rays. Some mornings the sky would cloud over from daybreak; the trees on the far shore would turn black; a black shadow would fall upon the river; and as one watched, the horizon would grow hazy with the roaring rush of rain, the far bank's shoreline seeming to take its leave in tears; the river would swell and rise, and the damp wind would go rioting freely among the branches and leaves of this shore.

Out from the womb of beam and rafter, into the outer world, I seemed to gain a second birth. Going forth to know each thing anew, all at once the dull covering of habit was utterly stripped away from the face of the earth. The stale luchi I ate each morning with green mango pickle—surely they held no difference in taste whatsoever from the very nectar that Indra himself partakes of in heaven. For nectar, indeed, does not reside within the substance itself, but within the

perceiving of it—and so it is that those who go seeking after it never manage to find it at all.

Behind the spot where we used to sit, enclosed by a wall, lay a small bathing pond with steps built round it; and just beside those steps stood a great jarul tree. All about, tall fruit trees stood close and thick, weaving a screen of shadow around the little pond. This small, enclosed, shaded, veiled beauty of the back-garden pond seemed to me exceedingly charming. How different it was from the broad, open Ganges bank in front! This was, as it were, the bride of the household. Hidden in her corner, spreading out her own hand-embroidered quilt of vines and leaves worked in green thread, she would murmur her heart's secrets in the hushed leisure of noon. In that very noon-hour, many a day, sitting alone in the shade of that jarul tree, by the water's edge, I imagined the fearsome kingdom of the Yaksha-city lying within the pond's deep floor.

For a long while I had held a great curiosity to see properly the rural villages of Bengal. The village households, the shrine to the goddess under the great tree, the paths and lanes, the games and sports, the market square, the imagined pattern of daily life—all this drew powerfully at my heart. That very village lay directly behind this garden on the Ganges bank—but we were forbidden to go there.

We had come out into the open, but freedom we had not gained. We had lived in a cage; now we merely sat upon a perch—the chain about our feet had not been cut.

One day, two of my guardians went out in the morning to stroll through the village. Unable to master the surge of my curiosity, I followed some distance behind them without their knowledge. Along the village lane, through the dense shade of thickets, past a hedge-bordered scum-covered pond, I walked on, sketching this scene again and again in my mind with great delight. A man was cleaning his teeth with a twig at the water's edge at that early hour, bare-bodied—this too has

remained with me to this day. Just then, my elders suddenly noticed me following behind. At once they scolded me sharply: "Go back, go back at once." It had struck them that I was not properly dressed to go out. My feet had no socks; over my shirt I wore no other decent covering—this they counted as my fault. But I had never had the least concern for socks or proper attire, and so it was not merely that I was forced, disappointed, to turn back that single day—having thus been found at fault, no future occasion for going out ever presented itself again.

That barrier to my going behind remained fixed; but the Ganges before me took away all my bonds entirely. Any sail-rigged boat that passed would, without my paying any fare, become the vessel of my imagination, and to whatever lands it set sail, geography to this day has never furnished any account.

That, I suppose, is a matter of some four decades past now. Since then, not for a single day have I set foot again upon that flowering champak-shaded bathing-step of that garden. Doubtless those trees and that house still stand; but I know that garden exists no more—for a garden, after all, is not made merely of trees and plants; it was built out of a boy's fresh wonder—and where now is that fresh wonder to be found?

I returned again to the house at Jorasanko. My days began entering the gaping maw of the Normal School, swallowed whole day after day like its regular ration of prey.

THE PRACTICE OF POETIC COMPOSITION

That blue exercise-book gradually filled up, in crooked lines and letters thin and thick, like a nest of insects. Under the eager, restless pressure of the boy's hand, it soon grew crumpled. Gradually its edges tore into something like fingers, which seemed to clutch and press down upon the writing within, as though holding it in a fist. Into what current of the Vaitarani's ghat the merciful goddess of oblivion has cast that blue exercise-book with its "Full Scap" cover, I do not know. Alas, its likeness exists no more. It has escaped the birth-pangs of the printing press.

That I was writing poetry—that this news should get about—was certainly not a matter of indifference to me. Though Satkari Dutt was not a teacher of our class, he held a particular fondness for me. He had written a book called Praniobrittanto (Accounts of Animals).

I hope no skilled and witty person will determine the reason for his affection by examining the subject matter of that book. One day he called me and asked, "I hear you write poetry." That I did indeed write, I did not deny. From then on, to encourage me, he would now and then give me a couplet or two and ask me to complete it. One of these I still remember:

"Everyone was troubled by the sun's fierce heat,
The rains brought hope, and fear is no more."

Of the verse I joined to this, only two lines remain in my memory. As proof that my poetry of that period cannot by any means be called obscure, let me here, on this occasion, place these two lines on record:

"The fish were once wretched, dwelling in the lake,
Now happily in the water they sport and play."

Whatever depth this contains pertains entirely to the lake—and is exceedingly transparent indeed.

Let me quote four lines from some other, more personal description—I hope its language and sentiment will be judged lucid enough, rhetorically speaking:

"Mango-pulp mixed with milk, into it plantain slices thrown,
Sandesh smeared thereupon—
A slurping, slapping sound, all around hushed and still,
The ant weeps as it goes across the plate."

Our school's Govinda Babu was a dark-complexioned, stout, thickset man. He was the Superintendent. Clad in a black coat, he would sit in the upstairs office with his ledgers, doing his paperwork. We were afraid of him. He was the school's rod-wielding judge. One day, driven to it by some tyranny, I rushed swiftly into his room. The accused numbered five or six large boys; on my side there was no witness at all. My only witness was my own tears. I won that trial, and from that acquaintance onward Govinda Babu would look upon me with eyes of compassion.

One day, during recess, I was suddenly summoned to his room. I went before him with a fearful heart, and he asked me, "I hear you write poetry." I did not hesitate for a moment to confess it. I do not remember on what elevated theme of sound morality he then bade me write a poem and bring it to him. Coming from a man of Govinda Babu's fearsome gravity, this command to write poetry was so oddly and surprisingly gentle that only those who were his pupils could understand it. The next day, when I brought him what I had written and showed it to him, he took me

along and made me stand before the whole scholarship class. "Read it aloud," he said. I recited it in a loud voice.

There is only one thing to be said in praise of this moral poem—that it lost its charm rather early on. Whatever ethical effect it produced upon the scholarship class was hardly encouraging. At the very least, the poem's recitation aroused not the slightest goodwill toward its author in the minds of the listeners. Most of the boys began saying among themselves that this composition surely could not be my own. One boy declared that he could produce and show the very printed book from which it had been stolen. No one pressed him to actually produce it. To believe is necessary—attempting to prove it might well undo the whole affair. After this, the number of aspirants to poetic fame began to grow. The path they took was not, I fear, the broad road to moral improvement.

Nowadays it is by no means rare for small children to write poetry. Today the very glamour of poetry has been utterly shattered. I recall that, back then, on the rare occasion some woman happened to write poetry, everyone regarded her as a marvel wrought by the Creator himself. Nowadays, were one to hear that some woman does not write poetry, that very fact would seem so improbable as to be scarcely believable. In these times the sprout of poetic fame lifts its head long before reaching the scholarship class, even without any special cultivation of encouragement. Therefore, the tale of the boy's exploits which I have unfolded here will not astonish any present-day Govinda Babu in the least.

SRIKANTH BABU

Around this time I gained a listener—such a listener I shall never find again. His capacity for being pleased was so extraordinary that he was utterly unfit for the post of a magazine's brief-summary critic. He was old, thoroughly ripened like a jackfruit gone perfectly soft—not the faintest hint of acidity remained anywhere in his nature. A head quite bald, a soft and gentle face clean-shaven of moustache, no trouble whatsoever with his teeth in that mouth, and two large eyes ever bright with unceasing laughter. When he spoke in his naturally deep voice, his whole hand and face and eyes would speak along with him. He was a pleasure-loving man steeped in the Persian learning of the old school, caring not a whit for anything English. His constant companion on his left side was a hookah; a sitar was forever cradled in his lap; and there was never any rest for the songs upon his lips.

Whether or not there was any prior acquaintance, by sheer force of his natural warmth he held such an unquestioned claim upon every human being that no one could ever deny it. I remember well: one day he took us along to an Englishman's photography studio to have our pictures taken. With him he struck up such a conversation in Hindi and Bengali mixed—addressing the man with such intimate, familial insistence, saying, "I simply cannot pay so much for the photograph, I am a poor man—no, no, sir, that simply cannot be"—that the Englishman, laughing, took his photograph cheaply. That such an incongruous request should sound, in the shop of a hard-nosed Englishman, not the least bit unseemly, was due to the fact that his relations with all mankind were, by nature, entirely without a trace of edge or awkwardness—he felt no hesitation before anyone, for there existed, within his mind, no cause for hesitation at all.

Some days he would take me along to the house of a European missionary. There, singing songs, playing the sitar, showering affection upon the missionary's children, offering endless praises of their two small booted feet, he would so enliven the gathering that no one else could ever have achieved the like. Had anyone else attempted such a thing, it would surely have been taken as an intrusion—but

coming from Srikanth Babu, it never seemed excessive at all; and for this reason everyone would laugh along with him and feel glad.

Moreover, no malicious tyrant could ever truly wound him. Attempts at insult never landed upon him as insult. At one time, a certain famous singer stayed for a while in our house. In his drunken states, this man would say to Srikanth Babu whatever came into his mouth. Srikanth Babu would take it all in with a smiling face, never offering the least protest. At last, owing to his ill-treatment of Srikanth Babu, it was decided that this singer should be dismissed from our house. At this Srikanth Babu grew quite distressed and tried to save him. Again and again he said, "He has done nothing at all—he was merely drunk."

That anyone should suffer sorrow was more than he could bear—even the mere telling of such a tale was unbearable to him. And so, when the boys, wishing to tease him for sport, would read aloud to him some pathetic passage from Vidyasagar's Sitar Banabas or Shakuntala, he would fling out both hands, protesting and pleading, growing quite agitated in his effort to make them stop somehow.

This old man was a friend to my father just as he was to my elder brothers, and to us as well. His age matched every one of us equally. Such an ideal listener for the recitation of poetry is not easily found. As a mountain stream, given even a single small pebble, will circle round it again and again, dancing and rejoicing, so too would he, given any occasion whatsoever, grow stirred to rapturous delight of his own accord. I had composed two hymns to God. In them, as was proper, I had not failed to mention the sorrows, sufferings, and torments of worldly existence. Srikanth Babu decided that if he read such thoroughly devout and spiritually complete poems to my father, he would surely be delighted. With great enthusiasm he took them off to be heard. As it happened, I myself was not present there—but I heard afterward that my father was greatly amused to discover, through the metre, that the harsh conflagration of worldly suffering had begun tormenting his youngest son at so tender an age. The gravity of the subject failed utterly to overawe him in the least. I can say with certainty—had our Superintendent Govinda

Babu been the one to hear those two poems, he would have understood their true worth.

In matters of song, I was Srikanth Babu's favourite pupil. He had a song—"Moy chherun Brajaki bashari" (I have abandoned Braj's flute). To have this song sung by my mouth for everyone to hear, he would drag me from room to room. I would take up the singing; he would strike resounding chords on his sitar, and at the point where the song's main refrain—"Moy chherun"—came round, he would grow transported, joining in himself, reciting it over and over tirelessly, shaking his head, gazing rapt into everyone's faces, as though nudging each one onward, striving to kindle their delight further still.

He was a devoted friend of my father's. It is from a Hindi song he once gave that a certain Brahmo hymn was adapted—"Antarataro antaratamo tini je—bhulo na re tãy" (He who is nearer than the nearest—forget Him not). Singing this song to my father, he would, overcome with feeling, rise from his chair mid-song. Striking the sitar with ringing chords, he would say once—"Antarataro antaratamo tini je"—then, turning it about, waving his hand before my father's very face, he would say—"Antarataro antaratamo tumi je" (You who are nearer than the nearest).

The day this old man came to see my father for the last time, my father was then at the garden by the Ganges at Chuchura. Srikanth Babu was by then afflicted with his final illness; he had no strength left to rise, and his eyelids had to be lifted with a finger to open his eyes. In this condition, under his daughter's care, he had come from Raipur in Birbhum to Chuchura. With immense difficulty, he managed just once to take the dust of my father's feet before returning to his lodgings at Chuchura, and within a short time thereafter, he passed away. I have heard from his daughter that even in the moment of approaching death, he attained his final, eternal silence while singing the song, "Ki madhur tabo karuna, prabho" (How sweet is Thy mercy, O Lord).

THE END OF BENGALI INSTRUCTION

At school, we were then one class below the scholarship class in Bengali studies. At home we had, however, gone far beyond that class's prescribed Bengali syllabus. At home we had finished Akshay Kumar Dutt's Padarthavidya (Natural Philosophy), and had also completed Meghnadbadh. We studied physics, but had no connection whatsoever with actual physical phenomena—it was mere book-learning, and our knowledge accordingly took the same shape. That period was entirely wasted. Indeed, I think it was worse than wasted—for the time lost in doing nothing at all is far less costly than the time lost in doing something that only proves harmful. Nor was the Meghnadbadh Kavya itself, for us, any source of pleasure. That which, upon reaching the plate, ought to be nourishing may, if pressed upon the head instead, grow burdensome indeed. Teaching good poetry to instruct in mere language is much like using a sword to shave a beard—the sword suffers indignity, and the cheek too meets grievous mishap. Poetry ought to be taught purely as poetry, from the standpoint of its emotional essence; to use it, by a sidelong trick, merely to serve the purposes of grammar and dictionary is never pleasing to Saraswati.

At this time, our stint at the Normal School suddenly came to an end. There is a little history behind this. Some teacher of our school had wished to read an English biography of my grandfather, written by Kishorimohan Mitra. My classmate and nephew Satyaprasad, mustering his courage, had gone to ask my father for that book. He had reckoned that the ordinary, everyday Bengali in which we habitually spoke to people generally would not do in my father's presence. And so, in such elevated and refined literary Bengali did he construct his sentences that my father concluded our Bengali, advancing further and further, had very nearly succeeded in overtaking his own native tongue altogether. The following morning, when, as usual, we had set up our table on the southern veranda, hung the black board upon the wall, and sat down to our lesson with Nilkamal Babu, all three of us were suddenly summoned to my father's third-floor room. He said, "From today you need no longer study Bengali." Our hearts danced with joy.

Our Nilkamal Pandit sat below still; the Bengali geometry book still lay open, and the intention to review the Meghnadbadh Kavya once more was, I believe, still in progress. But just as a house's elaborate arrangements, however complete, appear utterly false in the hour of death, so too, in our eyes, everything from our tutor down to the very nail that hung the blackboard suddenly, in a single instant, dissolved into a mirage of emptiness. How to convey to our tutor, with due gravity, the news of our deliverance—this became quite a puzzle. We delivered the news with all due restraint. The intricate geometric lines on the blackboard hung upon the wall stared fixedly at our faces; and that Meghnadbadh, every single letter of which had once been our enemy, now lay so innocently, so helplessly upon the table, that it was no longer impossible to imagine it as a friend.

When taking his leave, our tutor said: "In the discharge of my duty I have often treated you harshly—do not hold that against me. What I have taught you, you will come, in time, to appreciate."

I have indeed come to appreciate it. It was precisely because I was studying Bengali in my boyhood that my whole mind could be set in motion at all. Education, as far as possible, ought to resemble the act of eating. The pleasure of taste begins the very moment the first bite is taken; even before the stomach is filled, the stomach itself awakens gladly—and thereby the sluggishness of the digestive juices is dispelled. For the Bengali, there is no possibility of English instruction proceeding in this fashion. At its very first bite, both rows of teeth are jolted from end to end—a minor earthquake occurs within the mouth. Then, only after realizing, slowly, that it is not some lump of clay but rather a confection cooked in syrup, half one's age has already passed by. While tears stream endlessly from nose and eyes over the difficulty of spelling and grammar, the inner self remains utterly famished all the while. At last, after long delay and much hardship, once acquaintance with the food is finally made, the appetite itself has died away. If the mind is not given the chance, from the very outset, to exercise its own motive power, that very power of motion grows sluggish and falls into decline. At a time when, on every side, the fierce drive to teach hard, rigorous English had taken hold, the one who dared to arrange for

our long instruction in Bengali—to that person, my late third uncle, I now offer my heartfelt and grateful obeisance.

Leaving the Normal School, we enrolled at a European school called the Bengal Academy. This raised our dignity somewhat. It felt as though we had grown considerably—had, at least, risen to the first tier of freedom. In truth, whatever progress we made at this school lay entirely in that direction of freedom alone. What exactly we were studying there, I understood not at all, nor did I make the slightest effort to study—and even had I not, scarcely anyone would have noticed. The boys here were mischievous, but not contemptible—and sensing this distinction gave me a great deal of comfort. They would turn their palms upside down, write "ass" upon them, and say "hello," slapping one on the back as though in affection—thereby marking, upon the back of one's clothing, the initial letter of that four-footed creature so despised in polite society; or perhaps, walking along, they would suddenly crush something upon one's head and vanish somewhere, leaving no trace to be found; or sometimes one of them would strike suddenly and then turn his face away with the most innocent, gentle expression, so that, seeing him, one would mistake him for the very picture of saintliness. All this torment struck only the body, leaving no mark upon the mind—it was mere mischief, not insult. And so it seemed to me as though I had climbed out of the mire onto solid stone—even if the stone cut one's feet, at least one escaped the mire's filth. This school held one great advantage for a boy like me: no one entertained the impossible hope that we, through our studies, would ever achieve any real advancement. It was a small school, its income modest, and the school's headmaster was charmed by one particular virtue of ours—we paid our monthly fees regularly and on time. For this reason, Latin grammar never became unbearable for us, and even our gravest lapses in study left our backs unscathed. I daresay the headmaster of the school had forbidden the teachers from any such harsh treatment in this regard—not out of any particular tenderness toward us.

There was no real mischief-making in this school, and yet, for all that, it was still a school after all. Its rules were merciless, its walls stood like watchmen—there was not the least trace of home about it; it was simply a large box divided into

compartments. Nowhere was there any decoration, any picture, any colour, not the slightest effort made to draw a child's heart. That there exists in children a great and important thing called liking or disliking something—this notion had been utterly and entirely banished from the school's consideration. And so, the very moment one stepped through the school gate into its narrow courtyard, one's whole spirit would instantly turn heavy and despondent—and thus my old habit of running away from school found no cure here either.

I found one accomplice in the art of escape. My elder brothers used to study French under a certain teacher—everyone called him Munshiji; I have forgotten his actual name. He was a man past his prime, all skin and bone. His skeleton seemed wrapped in some black cloak—devoid of any juice or fat whatsoever. Persian, perhaps, he knew well enough, and English too, passably—but he showed not the slightest ambition to gain distinction in that field. His firm belief was that fencing with the staff was, for him, an extraordinary skill, quite equal to his supposedly matchless talent in music. He would stand in our courtyard under the blazing sun, wielding his staff in various strange postures—his own shadow serving as his opponent. Needless to say, his shadow could never once defeat him—and when, with a triumphant "hoo-hoo!" he would strike it down and, in the pride of victory, give a faint smile, the shadow would grow pale and lie silently at his feet. His nasal, off-key singing sounded like the music of some ghostly realm—it was a horror blended of raving and lamentation. Our music-master Bishnu would sometimes tell him, "Munshiji, you've broken my bread"—and without a word of reply, he would only laugh with the utmost contempt.

From this you may gather that pleasing Munshiji was no easy matter. Whenever we caught hold of him, he would, announcing our need for a holiday, write a letter to the school's headmaster on our behalf. The headmaster never troubled himself much over such letters—for he knew perfectly well that whether we went to school or not made not the slightest difference whatsoever to our education.

I now have a school of my own, and there the students commit all manner of offences—for it is the nature of students to offend, and of teachers not to forgive. If any of us, angered and alarmed by their conduct, grows intolerant of the mischief threatening our institution's good order and rushes to mete out harsh punishment at once, then all the sins of my own student days rise up in a row before me and stare into my face, laughing.

I understand quite well that we measure children's offences by the yardstick of adults, forgetting that small children move with the momentum of a torrent—if that current happens to touch upon some fault, there is no cause for despair, for within that very motion lies the easy remedy for every fault; the true danger lies only where the current has come to a standstill—it is there alone that caution is needed. For this reason, teachers' offences ought to be feared far more than those of their students.

To preserve their caste, Bengali students had a separate refreshment room. In this room I became acquainted with one or two students. All of them were considerably older than we were. One of them was extremely fond of a particular raga called Kafi, and even fonder still of some particular individual in his father-in-law's household—and it was for that reason he sang that raga so often, nor was his other conversation ever wanting either.

Something more may be said of another particular student. His distinguishing trait was an extraordinary passion for magic. Indeed, he had brought out a slim book on the subject of magic and, in doing so, styled and advertised himself as "Professor." I had never before encountered a student who had actually published his name in a printed book. For this reason alone, my reverence for him, at least in matters of magic, ran deep. For it seemed inconceivable to me that any falsehood could possibly be perpetrated between the straight, upright lines of printed type. Up to that point, printed letters had always lorded it over us like schoolmasters, and it was for this reason that I held them in particular awe. To write one's own composition in ink that never fades—was that such a small thing! Nowhere any

concealment, nothing whatsoever that could be hidden—one had to stand straight and upright before the whole world, arrayed in rows, and give an account of oneself; the road of retreat entirely closed off—so towering a self-confidence was hard indeed not to believe. I remember well that once, from the Brahmo Samaj press or somewhere else, I obtained one or two printed letters of my own name. Smearing them with ink and pressing them upon paper, the moment the impression began to appear, I felt as though I had witnessed a memorable event indeed.

We used to take our classmate, this budding author-friend, to school every day by carriage. On this pretext, his coming and going at our house grew frequent. He held considerable enthusiasm too for theatrical performances. With his help, we once, in our wrestling-arena, planted a number of bamboo poles, pasted paper over them, painted various colourful pictures, and set up a stage of sorts. I believe the ban from above prevented any performance ever taking place on that stage.

But without any stage at all, a farce was once performed. Its title might be given as *Bhrantibilas* (The Comedy of Errors). The author of that farce has already been somewhat introduced to the reader. He was my nephew Satyaprasad. Those who have seen his present calm and gentle demeanour would scarcely be able to imagine what a mischief-maker he was in his boyhood, capable, in playful jest, of engineering all manner of disorder.

The events of the period I am now describing belong to a later time. My age then was, I suppose, twelve or thirteen. This friend of ours would always say such astonishing things about various objects that, upon hearing them, I would be utterly astounded—so eager was I to test them for myself that it left me quite restless. But the materials in question were usually so rare that, short of following in the footsteps of Sindbad the Sailor, there was no way of obtaining them at all. Once, surely through some carelessness, the Professor let slip a comparatively easy method for achieving some impossible feat, and I resolved to put it to the test.

Who could have known that the glue of mysasage seeds, if rubbed onto the seed twenty-one times and dried, would make the seed sprout into a full tree within an hour, bearing fruit! But the word of a professor who had actually published a printed book could not simply be dismissed as unbelievable altogether.

We got our gardener to gather, over the course of several days, a good quantity of mysasage glue, and on a Sunday holiday, in order to test it upon a mango seed, we went up to our secret sanctuary of mysteries on the third-floor terrace.

I applied myself single-mindedly to smearing glue upon the seed and drying it in the sun—and whatever result this may have produced, I am certain grown-up readers will ask no questions on that score. But what strange, magical tree, complete with branches and leaves, was springing up in some corner of the terrace within that very hour, I had not the slightest inkling. And the consequences of that, too, proved rather extraordinary.

It was only much later that I noticed the Professor had begun avoiding my company with visible awkwardness. He no longer sat beside me in the carriage; everywhere, he seemed to keep himself at a certain remove from me.

One day, quite suddenly, at noon, in our study, he proposed: "Come, let us jump down from this bench and see whose style of jumping is which." I thought that the Professor, being privy to so many of creation's mysteries, must surely know some deep secret about jumping as well. Everyone jumped; I jumped too. The Professor gave a solemn, inward, inarticulate grunt and nodded his head gravely. Despite much pleading, no clearer utterance than this could be drawn from him.

One day the magician said, "The sons of a certain noble family wish to make your acquaintance; you must go once to their house." Our guardians saw no objection whatsoever, and we too went there.

The room filled with a crowd of curious onlookers. Everyone expressed eagerness to hear me sing. I sang a song or two. My age was then tender, and my voice was by no means as deep and resonant as a lion's roar. Many nodded their heads and said—"Indeed, what a sweet voice!"

Afterward, when we went to eat, everyone sat around us still, observing our manner of eating. Having previously mixed very little with people from outside, my nature was naturally rather shy. Besides, as I have already mentioned, under the covetous gaze of our servant Ishwar, eating sparingly while eating had, for me, become a lifelong habit. That day, the audience, seeing my restraint at table, expressed considerable astonishment. Had the keen scrutiny with which the guests that day observed the conduct of their invited young guest been sustained and widened, Bengal might well have achieved extraordinary progress in the science of zoology.

Not long after this, from the fifth rank came one or two peculiar letters from the magician, and thereby I understood the whole affair. After that, the curtain fell.

I heard from Satya himself that, while performing the magic trick with the mango seed, he had convinced the Professor that my guardians, for educational convenience, were sending me to school disguised as a boy—but that this was in fact my disguise. Those curious souls engaged in their own self-invented scientific discussions ought to be told this: in the jumping test, I had led off with my left foot—and how great an error that misstep truly was, I did not come to know until that very day.

FATHER

Even from some years before my birth, my father had been almost constantly engaged in travel abroad. In my childhood, one might say he was virtually a stranger to me. Now and then he would come home suddenly; he would bring foreign servants with him, and I would feel a great eagerness to get acquainted with them. Once, a young Punjabi servant named Lenu came with him. The regard we showed him would scarcely have fallen short of what Ranjit Singh himself might have received. He was foreign, and Punjabi besides—this alone was enough to capture our hearts entirely. Just as, in the Puranas, there was reverence for Bhima and Arjuna, so too did the Punjabi race command in my mind a similar sort of awe. They were warriors—though they may have lost the odd battle here and there, even that we counted as the fault of their enemies rather than any failing of their own. Having Lenu, of that very race, within our own house gave me a feeling of considerable inner expansion. In my sister-in-law's room there was a toy ship covered in glass, which, when wound up, would send its painted waves of cloth rippling one after another while the ship swayed to the tune of an organ. Through much pleading and coaxing, I would borrow this marvellous object from my sister-in-law and, very often, use it to dazzle this Punjabi. Being confined behind the bars of my room, whatever belonged to foreign lands, whatever came from distant places, drew my mind with irresistible force. That is why I would grow so absorbed in Lenu. It was for this very reason too that a Jewish hawker named Gabriel, wearing his tasselled Jewish garb, would give my heart quite a stir whenever he came to sell perfume; and the bulky Kabuliwala too, with his loose, dirty pyjamas and jingling accoutrements, was to me an object of fascination mixed with fear.

Be that as it may, whenever father came, we would only wander about at some distance, circling among his retinue of servants to satisfy our curiosity. Reaching him directly never quite came to pass.

I remember well that once, in our childhood, there was talk among people of the English government's perennial bogey—the fear of a Russian invasion of India.

Some well-meaning relative had, with evident relish, elaborated to my mother this looming catastrophe. Father was then in the hills. Whether the Russians might suddenly appear like a comet through some breach in the Himalayas, having crossed through Tibet, was of course quite impossible to say. This filled my mother's mind with great anxiety. Surely none of the household supported her in this apprehension. Despairing of gaining the sympathy of the more mature members of the family, Mother, in the end, sought refuge in this boy. She told me, "Write a letter to your father telling him about the Russians." Bearing my mother's anxiety, that was my very first letter to my father. I knew not at all how to write a letter, what to say. I took refuge in the office of the great Munshi Mahananda. The letter was doubtless composed correctly enough. But its language was thoroughly steeped in the dry, faded fragrance of the goddess Saraswati as she dwells amid the estate-office's musty ledgers. I received a reply to this letter. In it my father wrote—there was no cause for fear whatsoever; he himself would drive the Russians away. Even this powerful assurance did not seem to dispel my mother's fear of the Russians—but my confidence regarding my father grew considerably. From then on, I began going daily to Mahananda's office to have letters written to him. Wearied by the boy's persistent pestering, Mahananda drafted a few for a while. But there was, of course, no way of paying the postage. I had it firmly fixed in my mind that once the letter was handed over into Mahananda's care, I need think no further of the remaining responsibility—the letter would somehow reach its destination unaided. Needless to say, Mahananda was considerably older than I, and these letters never did reach the peaks of the Himalayas.

After long years abroad, when father would come to Calcutta for a few brief days, his very presence seemed to set the whole house astir with life. I would see the elders don their robes, dress with meticulous care, and, if chewing betel, spit it out before going to see him. Everyone moved about with great caution. Lest any flaw mar the cooking, Mother herself would go and sit in the kitchen to oversee it. Old Kinu the runner would stand ready at the door in his ceremonial turban and white coat. Lest there be commotion or running about on the veranda that might disturb his rest, we had been warned well in advance. We would walk softly, speak softly, not daring even to peep in.

Once father came home to perform the sacred thread ceremony for the three of us. Taking the Vedanta scholar Bagishwar to help him, he compiled the rite of investiture from the Vedic mantras himself. For many days, sitting in the hall, dear Becharam Babu made us recite, over and over, in the correct manner, the mantras of the Upanishads as gathered in the Brahmo scripture. Following, as far as possible, the ancient Vedic method, our investiture ceremony was performed. Heads shaved, wearing the deerskin girdle, we three young initiates were confined for three days in the third-floor room. This we found tremendous fun. We would seize each other's earrings and set up a great tug-of-war. There was a ball lying in one corner of the room—standing on the veranda, whenever we spotted some servant passing on the floor below, we would fling it down with a resounding thump; and they, glancing up and catching sight of us, would immediately duck their heads and flee in fear of getting into trouble. In truth, the strict discipline by which sages' young disciples were meant to pass their days in their teacher's household was not quite how our own days actually passed. I believe that, had one gone searching among the hermitages of ancient times, one might well have found boys not unlike ourselves; there is no proof that they were, in fact, so very much better behaved. When Sharadvata and Shringarava were ten or twelve years old, if some Purana claims they spent their days solely chanting Vedic mantras and offering oblations into the sacred fire, we are not bound to believe this entirely at face value—for the Purana called Shishu-charitra (The Conduct of Children) is older than all other Puranas. No scripture so authoritative as this has ever been written in any tongue.

After becoming a newly-invested Brahmin, I developed quite a fondness for reciting the Gayatri mantra. I would try, with particular care and single-minded attention, to recite this mantra. It is not that at that age I could properly grasp its true significance. I remember well that I would take hold of the phrase "Bhurbhuvah svah" and try, through it, to expand my mind to its fullest extent. What exactly I understood, what exactly I imagined, is hard to say precisely—but this much is certain: that grasping the literal meaning of words is not, for a human being, the greatest thing of all. The greatest part of education is not explanation but the

wound it strikes within the mind. If a child were asked to explain in words what strikes and resonates within him from that very blow, whatever he manages to say would be, quite frankly, something rather childish. But what resounds within his mind is far greater than what he can express in speech; and those who, teaching in schools, wish to judge all success purely by examination results, take no account of this at all. I recall that in my boyhood I failed to understand many things, and yet they stirred something deep within me nonetheless. In my earliest childhood, at the garden by the Ganges at Mulajore, my eldest brother was once, upon the terrace, reciting Kalidasa's Meghadutam; I had no need to understand it, nor indeed any means of doing so—his joy-filled, passionate recitation of that verse-form was, in itself, quite sufficient for me. In my boyhood, when I knew scarcely any English at all, I read straight through, from cover to cover, a lavishly illustrated copy of *The Old Curiosity Shop*. I understood perhaps fifteen per cent of what it said—yet out of some vague, shadowy impression forming in my mind, I wove my own multicoloured thread of connection, and strung the pictures together upon it. Had I fallen into an examiner's hands, I would certainly have received a great big zero—but for me, that reading was by no means as empty as that zero would suggest. Once, in boyhood, while boating with father on the Ganges, I came upon, among his books, a very old edition of the *Gitagovinda* published by Fort William Press. It was printed in Bengali letters; the verses were not divided according to metre, but ran on, one line joined without break to the next, as though in prose. At that time I knew no Sanskrit whatsoever. Knowing Bengali well, however, I could grasp the meaning of many of the words. How many times I read that copy of the *Gitagovinda*, I cannot say. I understood nothing at all of what Jayadeva actually meant to say, but something was being woven together within my mind through the union of metre and word, and that was, to me, no small thing. I remember that the line—"Nibhrita-nikunja-griham gatayā nishi rahasi nilinam vasantam"—stirred within me a wonderful sense of beauty; amid the ringing cadence of the metre, that single phrase—"nibhrita-nikunja-griham"—was, by itself, enough for me. Since that book was printed in the manner of prose, I had to discover for myself Jayadeva's intricate metre—and that very task of discovery was, to me, a source of great delight. The day I managed to recite correctly, with the proper pause, the line—"Ahaḥ kalayāmi valayādi-manibhūṣaṇam Hari-viraha-dahana-vahanena bahu-dūṣaṇam"—how happy I was that day! I had not understood Jayadeva completely, nor indeed can it even be called partial understanding—and yet such was the

beauty that filled my mind that I copied out the entire Gitagovinda, from beginning to end, into a notebook. A little older still, I recall the verse from the Kumarasambhava:

"Mandakinī-nirjhara-shīkarāṇām
Bhoḍhā muhuḥ kampita-devadāruḥ
Yad vāyur-abbhishta-mṛigaiḥ kirāta-
Rāseṇyate bhinna-shikhaṇḍi-barhaḥ—"

Reading this verse, one day, my whole inner being felt strangely stirred. I understood nothing else—only the two phrases "Mandakinī-nirjhara-shīkara" and "kampita-devadāruḥ" enchanted my mind. My heart grew restless with longing to savour the whole verse's meaning. When the pandit finally explained the whole of it to me, my heart sank. That the peacock-tail crest upon the deer-hunting Kirata's head was being torn apart, feather by feather, by the wind—this precision of detail began to trouble me greatly. When I had not fully understood it, I had been quite content.

Whoever recalls their own childhood well will understand this: that understanding everything, from start to finish, with complete clarity, is not necessarily the greatest gain of all. In our country the traditional storytellers knew this truth well, and that is why the art of kathakata is full of grand, resonant Sanskrit words that fill the ear, and embedded within it are many profound truths which the listeners never grasp with full clarity, yet catch a mere glimpse of—and the value of that glimpse is by no means small. Those who calculate education strictly by profit and loss examine, with great scrutiny, whether what was given was fully understood or not. Children, and those who are not highly educated, dwell first in that primal heaven of knowledge where a man attains without fully understanding—and when the fall from that heaven comes, then arrives the sorrowful day of full comprehension. But even this is not entirely true. The road of not-quite-understanding is, in this world, always the broadest road of all. Were that road to close entirely, the world's

marketplace of daily commerce would not shut down, true enough—but the way to the ocean's shore would be lost altogether, and the ascent to the mountain's peak would become impossible.

That is why I was saying: I did not, at that age, understand the true significance of the Gayatri mantra, but there exists within a human being's heart something that functions even without complete understanding. And so I remember one particular day—sitting in a corner of the marble-paved floor of our study, reciting the Gayatri, tears suddenly began, quite unbidden, to fill my eyes and fall. Why the tears were falling, I myself could not in the least understand. Had I fallen into some strict examiner's hands, I would, like a fool, have given some reason that had nothing whatsoever to do with the Gayatri mantra. The truth of the matter is this: whatever work is proceeding within the inner sanctum of the heart does not always send its news through to the reach of the intellect.

JOURNEY TO THE HIMALAYAS

On the occasion of my sacred-thread ceremony, when my head was shaved, I fell into terrible anxiety about how I should ever face school again. Whatever affection an Englishman's son may feel for the cow, he certainly bears no devotion toward the Brahmin; and so, if my shorn head did not invite other missiles, it would certainly invite showers of laughter.

It was in the midst of such gloomy reflection that one day I was summoned to the room on the third floor. Father asked whether I wished to accompany him to the Himalayas. If only I could have shouted "Yes!" loud enough to rend the sky, that would have been the answer my heart demanded. Where was the Bengal Academy, and where the Himalayas!

When the time came to leave the house, Father, following his lifelong custom, gathered everyone in the house onto the veranda for prayers. Having bowed to my elders, I climbed into the carriage beside him. For the first time in my life, clothes had been made especially for me. Father himself had decided what colour and cut the cloth should be. For my head there was a round velvet cap worked with gold thread. I carried it in my hand, for I secretly objected to wearing a cap upon my newly-shaved head. No sooner had we boarded the carriage than Father said, "Put it on your head." With Father, there was no question of any lapse in proper decorum. The cap had to be placed upon my abashed skull. Whenever I found a moment's opportunity on the train, I would take it off; but Father's eye never once missed me. I would have to restore it to its place immediately.

From his smallest undertakings to his largest, everything my father conceived and did was executed with perfect precision. He could not bear to leave anything vague in his mind, nor could his actions ever be carried out carelessly. All duties—his toward others and others' toward him—were most exactly defined. Our national temperament, by contrast, is rather loose and slack; we do not consider small

deviations here and there as any breach of obligation. For this reason, all of us had to remain extremely careful and watchful in our dealings with him. A little more or a little less might perhaps cause no real harm, but the slightest departure from what had been arranged would wound him. Whatever he resolved upon, he would see every detail of it clearly before his mind's eye. Thus, in any undertaking, exactly which object should be placed where, who should sit where, precisely how much of which task should fall to whose charge—all this he would settle beforehand in his mind, down to the last particular, and would permit no deviation whatsoever. Afterward, once the task was completed, he would hear accounts of it from various people. Matching each person's account against the others, and fitting them together in his mind, he would try to see the event clearly. In this respect our national character was entirely foreign to him. In his resolves, his thoughts, his conduct and his observances, there was no room whatsoever for even the slightest slackness. For this reason, during our journey to the Himalayas, for as long as I remained with him, I enjoyed on the one hand an abundance of freedom, while on the other, all conduct was inviolably fixed. Wherever he granted leave, he placed no obstacle for any reason; wherever he laid down a rule, he left not the smallest gap.

At the outset of the journey, we were to stay for some days at Bolpur. Satya had gone there with our parents some time before. From what I had heard from him about the journey, no child of a respectable household in the nineteenth century could ever have believed it. But in our childhood we had not learned to draw the line clearly between the possible and the impossible. Krittibas and Kashiram Das had given us no help in this matter. The gaudy children's books and picture-laden children's papers had never taken care to warn us beforehand about truth and falsehood. That there exists in the world a stern law of consequence—this we had to learn only by knocking against it ourselves.

Satya had told me that unless one possessed special skill, boarding a train was a fearsome ordeal—one slip of the foot, and there was no saving oneself. Then, when the train began to move, one had to summon all the strength in one's body and sit firmly, or else it would give such a terrible jolt that a man might be flung off to who

knew where. Arriving at the station, my heart was full of trepidation. But I climbed aboard so easily that I began to suspect the real ordeal of boarding must still lie ahead. Then, when the train departed with such perfect ease, and I found not the faintest hint of danger anywhere, my spirits sank in disappointment.

The train sped on; the vast fields bordered with the green and blue of rows of trees, and the shadowy villages, went rushing past on either side of the railway like the unfolding of two painted scrolls, as though a river of mirage were flowing by. We reached Bolpur in the evening. I climbed into the palanquin and closed my eyes. My wish was that all the wonders of Bolpur should unfold before my waking eyes only the next morning; if I caught even a hint of them in the indistinctness of evening, it would spoil the full feast of joy that awaited the morrow.

I rose at dawn, my heart pounding, and came out to stand outside. My earlier traveller had told me that one difference between Bolpur and other places in the world was this—that although there was no shelter of any kind on the path from the estate house to the kitchen, still the sun and rain touched one not at all. I set out to discover this strange path. Readers will not be surprised to learn that to this day I have not managed to find it.

We were town children who had never in our lives seen a rice field, and having read in books about cowherd boys, we had painted them most charmingly upon the canvas of our imagination. We had heard from Satya that the fields of Bolpur were surrounded on all four sides by ripening paddy, and that playing with the cowherd boys was a daily, ordinary occurrence there. Gathering rice from the paddy fields, cooking it, and sitting down together with the cowherds to eat—this, we understood, was a chief part of the game.

Anxiously I looked about on every side. Alas, where in this desert plain was any field of rice to be found? Cowherd boys might perhaps have been somewhere on the plain, but there was no way of distinguishing them specially as cowherd boys.

The grief over what I had failed to see did not take long to fade—what I did see was enough for my purposes. Here there was no rule of servants. Fortune's boundary-wall had drawn but a single blue line around the horizon of the plain, and this offered no obstacle to my unrestrained wanderings.

Although I was quite young, Father never forbade me my freedom of movement without cause. In places on the plains of Bolpur, the rain's floodwaters had eroded the sandy soil, and below the level of the plain, small ranges of hills studded with red gravel and various kinds of stone, forming caves and ravines and tributary streams, had revealed the geological history of a land fit for the Valakhilyas. Here these ravined lands are called khoai. From here I would gather various kinds of stones in the folds of my garment and bring them to Father. He never once dismissed this labour of mine as trifling. He would express delight and say, "How wonderful! Wherever did you find all these!" I would say, "There are so many more like this! Thousands and thousands! I can bring you some every day." He would say, "That would indeed be splendid. Decorate this hillock of mine with those stones."

An attempt had been made to dig a well, but it had been abandoned as the soil proved too hard. The earth dug from that unfinished pit had been used to raise a tall mound on the south side, in imitation of a hill. There, in the mornings, my father would sit upon a stool for his devotions. Before him the sun would rise over the eastern horizon of the plain. It was this very hillock that he encouraged me to adorn with stones. When we left Bolpur, I felt great sorrow that I could not carry away with me this vast treasure of collected stones. I did not then understand that every possession carries its own burden and toll; and even today I find it hard to grasp that merely having gathered something gives one no claim to maintain one's bond with it forever. Had Providence granted the wish of my earnest childhood prayer of that day—that "you shall bear this burden of stones all your life"—I could not now laugh at the matter so lightly.

Somewhere in the khoai, water seeping through the earth collected in a deep hollow. This pool of water, overflowing its bounds, would trickle murmuring through the sand. Tiny little fish, at the mouth of this pool, would display their pride in swimming against the current. I went to Father and said, "I have seen a beautiful stream of water; it would be lovely if we brought our bathing and drinking water from there." He joined in my enthusiasm and said, "Indeed, that would be splendid," and, to reward the discoverer, arranged for water to be fetched from that very spot.

I would wander at all hours through the valleys and ridges of that khoai in search of some unprecedented thing. In this small, unknown realm, I was Livingstone. It was as if this were the reverse-side country of a telescope's view. Just as the little hills and streams were small, so too, here and there, the wild jam and wild date trees were stunted and squat. My discovered little river's fish were correspondingly tiny, and as for the discoverer himself—there is nothing more to say.

Father, I think for the cultivation of my sense of responsibility, would leave with me two or four annas' worth of coins, saying that I must keep accounts, and he entrusted me with the duty of winding his expensive gold watch. He gave no thought to the possible risk in this—his intention was simply to initiate me into responsibility. In the mornings, when he went out for a walk, he would take me along. If we saw a beggar on the way, he would order me to give alms. But when it came to reconciling accounts with him afterward, the sums never quite matched. One day, indeed, the treasury grew larger than it should have. He said, "I see I shall have to make you my cashier—money increases in your hands." I would wind his watch carefully and regularly. My care was perhaps rather too vigorous, for the watch soon had to be sent to Calcutta for repair.

I am reminded here of the day, much later in my adult life, when, having taken on responsibilities, I had to render accounts to him. He was then living on Park Street. On the second and third of every month I had to read out the accounts to him. By then he could no longer read for himself. I would place before him a full statement

of all income and expenditure, comparing it with the previous month and the previous year. First he would listen to the round figures and add and subtract them in his head. If he ever sensed any inconsistency, then the smaller figures would have to be read out to him one by one. Some days it so happened that where there was some weakness in the accounts, I compressed matters to spare his displeasure, but it was never successfully concealed. He would hold the whole shape of the accounts pictured in his mind. Wherever there was a gap, he could seize upon it at once. For this reason those two days of the month were days of particular anxiety. I have said before that it was in his very nature to see everything clearly in his mind—whether it were figures in an account, or a scene in nature, or the arrangements for some ceremony. Many things—the new temple at Santiniketan, for instance—he never saw with his own eyes. But whoever went to Santiniketan and came to him afterward, he would question closely, gathering details from each person, until he had drawn the unseen things completely and fully in his mind. His powers of memory and retention were extraordinary. For this reason, once he had grasped something in his mind, it never afterward slipped from him.

In the Bhagavad Gita, the verses that appealed to him had been marked. These he gave me to copy out, along with the Bengali translation. At home I was an insignificant child; here, when such weighty tasks were laid upon me, I began to feel keenly the dignity of it.

By this time I had bidden farewell to that ragged blue exercise book and acquired a bound letter-diary. Now my attention turned to maintaining a poet's dignity through the accoutrements of notebooks and writing implements. It is not merely the writing of poetry, but the effort to establish oneself as a poet before one's own imagination, that has taken hold. And so, when I wrote poetry at Bolpur, I loved to sit at the edge of the garden beneath a coconut tree, my legs stretched out on the ground, filling my notebook. This seemed to me quite befitting a poet. Sitting upon the grassless, pebbled ground, in the heat of the sun, I wrote a heroic poem entitled "The Defeat of Prithviraj." But for all its heroic sentiment, that poem could not be saved from destruction. Its fitting vehicle, that same bound letter-diary, followed

its elder sister, the blue notebook, to wherever it went, leaving no address behind for anyone.

Setting out from Bolpur, we halted here and there at Sahebganj, Danapur, Allahabad, Cawnpore and other places, and finally arrived at Amritsar.

An incident occurred on the way that remains vividly etched in my memory even now. The train had stopped at some large station. The ticket-examiner came and looked at our tickets. He glanced once at my face. He seemed to suspect something but did not dare to speak. After a little while another man came—the two of them fidgeted near the door of our carriage and went away again. The third time, I believe the stationmaster himself appeared. Having examined my half-fare ticket, he asked Father, "Is this boy's age not perhaps more than twelve?" Father said, "No." I was then eleven. My build was certainly rather larger than my age. The stationmaster said, "The full fare will have to be paid for him." My father's eyes blazed. He immediately took out a note from his pocket. When they brought back the change after deducting the fare, he took that money and flung it away; it scattered across the stone platform floor, jingling and rolling. The stationmaster withdrew in great confusion—the meanness of the suspicion that Father would tell a lie to save money had utterly humbled him.

Amritsar's Golden Temple remains in my memory like a dream. Many mornings I went on foot with Father to the Sikh temple in the middle of that sacred pool. There, devotional singing was always in progress. My father, sitting among those Sikh worshippers, would sometimes suddenly join their hymn-singing in tune—hearing this devotional song from a foreigner's mouth, they would grow greatly excited and rise to honour him. On returning, he would bring back pieces of crystallised sugar and sweets.

Once Father had one of the Golden Temple's musicians brought to our lodgings and listened to devotional songs from him. I believe that whatever reward was given

him, he would have been just as pleased with less. The result of this was that the influx of aspiring singers to our lodgings grew so great that strong measures had to be taken to bar their way. Finding no opportunity at the house, they took to besieging us on the public road. Every morning when Father would take me out walking, at every turn some singer with a tanpura slung over his shoulder would suddenly appear before us. Just as a bird unfamiliar with hunters starts at the sight of a gun barrel over someone's shoulder, so we would start at the sight of the neck of a tanpura in some distant corner of the road. But the game had grown so wary that the sound of their tanpuras served only as an empty threat—they would drive us far away, but could never actually bring us down.

When evening drew near, Father would come and sit on the veranda facing the garden. Then it would fall to me to sing him Brahmo hymns. The moon would have risen, and moonlight, filtering through the shadows of the trees, would fall upon the veranda—I would be singing out of tune—

Without You, O Lord, who shall avert calamity,
Who shall be our help in worldly darkness—

He would sit in silence, his head bowed, hands folded in his lap, listening—that picture of the evening still comes back to my mind today.

I have mentioned earlier that once Father laughed upon hearing two devotional poems of mine, composed in my childhood, recited before Shrikanth Babu. Later, in adult years, I was able to take my revenge for that on another occasion, and I wish to record that incident here.

Once, at a Magh Utsav, I composed a good many songs, both morning and evening. Among them was one song—"My eyes cannot see You though You dwell in every eye."

Father was then at Chinsurah. There I and Jyotidada were summoned. Seating Jyotidada at the harmonium, he asked me to sing all the new songs one by one. Some songs had to be sung twice.

When the singing was finished, he said, "If the king of the land knew its language and understood the value of literature, then surely they would reward the poet. Since there is no possibility of that from the king's side, then I must undertake that task myself." So saying, he placed a cheque for five hundred rupees in my hand.

Father, wishing to teach me English, had brought with him many volumes of the Peter Parley's Tales series. From among these he selected the life of Benjamin Franklin as my textbook. He had thought that a biography would read rather like a story, and that reading it would benefit me. But in teaching it, his mistake became apparent. Benjamin Franklin was an intensely practical man. His calculating, businesslike morality's narrowness distressed my father. Teaching me passage after passage, he would grow quite vexed at Franklin's thoroughly worldly wisdom and moralising, and could not refrain from protesting.

Before this, apart from memorising the Mugdhabodh grammar, there had been no other practice of Sanskrit study. Father began teaching me the second part of the Rijupath straightaway, and along with it had me memorise the noun-declensions from the Upakramanika. We had been made to read Bengali in such a way that our Sanskrit education had already progressed considerably through it. From the very outset he encouraged me, as far as I was able, in the composition of Sanskrit prose. Whatever I read, I would jumble up its words, stringing together long compounds, adding anusvaras wherever I pleased, thereby transforming the language of the gods into something fit for demons. But Father never once mocked this strange audacity of mine.

Besides this, he would explain to me orally many matters from Proctor's simply-written English astronomy text; I would write these down in Bengali.

Among the books he had brought for his own reading, one particularly caught my eye. It was Gibbon's massive work, bound in ten or twelve volumes. Looking at it, one would never guess it contained any pleasure whatsoever. I used to think to myself that I was compelled to read many things because I was a child, having no choice in the matter—but surely Evan could have chosen not to read it if he wished, so why this suffering?

We stayed about a month at Amritsar. From there, at the end of Chaitra, we set out for Dalhousie. The month at Amritsar was passing too slowly. The call of the Himalayas was making me restless.

As we ascended the mountain in a jhampan, various spring blossoms had set the valleys and slopes of the mountain ablaze in row upon row with the fire of their beauty. We would set out early each morning after milk and bread, and take shelter in the evening at a dak-bungalow. All day long my eyes had no rest—I feared lest something should escape my notice. Wherever, at some corner of the mountain, at some turn of the path, a cluster of leaf-laden trees stood casting dense shade, and where, near the lap of meditating ancient ascetics, one or two streams, like playful hermit-maidens, went trickling through that shaded ground, over moss-covered black stones, out from the secret depths of dense-cool darkness—there the bearers would set down the jhampan to rest. I would think greedily: why must we leave all these places behind? How good it would be to stay here forever.

This is the great advantage of new acquaintance. The mind does not yet know that there is much more of the same to come. Once it knows this, the calculating mind tries to economise its attention. When it regards each and every thing as utterly rare, only then does the mind cast off its parsimony and pay the full price. That is why, sometimes, walking along the streets of Calcutta, I imagine myself a foreigner.

Then I realise at once that there is much to see—only I do not pay the price of attention, and so cannot see. It is for this very reason that people travel abroad, to satisfy their hunger for seeing.

Father had given me charge of his small cash-box. There was no particular reason to think I was the most suitable person for this task. It held a good deal of money for travelling expenses. He could have entrusted it to Kishori Chatterjee's hands and been at ease, but his purpose was specifically to place special responsibility on me. On reaching the dak-bungalow one day, I had left the box on the table in the room instead of handing it to him, and for this he reprimanded me.

On reaching the dak-bungalow, Father would sit outside on a stool. As evening came on, the stars would appear astonishingly clear in the mountain's transparent sky, and Father would point out the constellations to me and discuss astronomy.

At Brahmaur, our lodging was on the very topmost peak of a mountain. Though it was then the month of Baishakh, the cold was extremely severe. Indeed, in those parts of the path where the sun never fell, the snow had not yet melted.

Even here, fearing no danger, Father never once forbade me from wandering the mountains at my own will.

Below our lodging, in a valley, lay an extensive forest of oaks. In that forest I would go wandering alone with my iron-tipped walking stick. The trees stood like colossal giants casting vast shadows; what centuries of abundant life they held! Yet this day's utterly tiny human child was roaming unabashed, rubbing against their very bodies, and they could not speak a single word! The moment I entered the shade of that forest, I seemed to feel a particular touch upon me—as if a deep coolness, like the body of some reptile, and upon the dry leaf-litter of the forest floor, the

play of light and shade seemed like the strange, mottled markings of some vast primeval reptile's skin.

My sleeping room was a corner room. Lying in bed at night, through the glass window, in the indistinct starlight, I could see the pale, snow-lit peak of the mountain. On some nights, I know not how late, I would see Father, wrapped in a red shawl, walking in silent movement with a candle-lamp in his hand, going to sit for his devotions on the outer, glass-enclosed veranda.

Then, after another spell of sleep, I would suddenly find Father shaking me awake. The darkness of night had not yet fully lifted. That was the hour fixed for my memorising "naraḥ nara narāḥ" from the Upakramanika. From within the warm cocoon of winter blankets, this awakening was a matter of considerable sorrow.

At sunrise, when Father, after his morning devotions, would finish a bowl of milk, he would then have me stand beside him for another round of worship through the recitation of Upanishadic verses.

After that he would set out with me for a walk. How could I possibly keep pace with him? Even many grown men lacked the capacity for it. Midway, I would give up at some point and, taking a footpath, climb back to our lodging ahead of him.

When Father returned, about an hour of English lessons would follow. Then, at ten o'clock, a bath in ice-cold water. From this there was no exemption whatsoever; not even the servants dared to mix warm water with the cold against his order. He would tell me stories of how, in his youth, he had bathed in even more unbearably cold water, to inspire me. Drinking milk was another austerity of mine. My father drank milk in great quantity. Whether I inherited this paternal capacity for milk-drinking, I cannot say for certain. But as I have already mentioned, my habits of eating and drinking had developed in quite the opposite direction. I was required

to drink milk regularly, just as he did. I sought refuge with the servants. Out of pity for me, or perhaps out of concern for themselves, they would increase the proportion of froth to milk in the bowl.

After the midday meal, Father would have me sit for lessons once more. But this was beyond my capacity. The interrupted sleep of dawn took its revenge for that untimely disturbance. I would keep nodding off in sleep. Seeing my condition, the moment Father gave me leave, sleep would vanish who knows where. Then would come the turn of the divine Nagadhiraj.

Some afternoons I would walk alone with my stick from one mountain to another; Father never expressed any anxiety over this. I have observed, to the end of his life, that he never wished in any way to obstruct our independence. I have done much that ran contrary to his taste and opinion—he could have curbed it by exercising authority had he wished, but he never did so. He waited for us to do what was right of our own inner accord. It gave him no satisfaction that we should embrace truth and propriety merely from the outside; he knew that unless one could love truth, one could not truly receive it. He also knew that though one may stray far from truth, one may yet return to it one day, but if truth is accepted under artificial compulsion, whether unwillingly or in ignorance, the path of return into truth is thereby blocked.

At one point in my youth, I took a fancy that I would travel by bullock-cart along the Grand Trunk Road all the way to Peshawar. No one approved of this proposal of mine, and there were many objections to it. But when I mentioned it to my father, he said, "Why, that is an excellent idea; can travel by rail even be called travel?" So saying, he told me stories of how he himself had travelled on foot, by horse-carriage and other such means. He made not the slightest mention of any hardship or danger that might befall me in this.

On another occasion, when I had newly been appointed Secretary of the Adi Samaj, I went to Father's house on Park Street and told him that I did not think it right that the Adi Brahmo Samaj should refuse to seat acharyas of other castes besides Brahmins upon its platform. He said to me at once, "Very well, if you can, remedy it." When I received his sanction, I discovered that I lacked the power to remedy it. I could only perceive the imperfection but could not create perfection. Where was the authority by which I should summon the right people to speak? Where the materials with which, breaking down the old structure, I might build something new in its place? So long as the right men do not come forward of themselves, even a fixed rule is better than none—this, I believe, was his view. But he never forbade me, not even for a moment, by voicing any objection. Just as he let me wander alone upon mountain and hill, so too, in the path of truth, he gave me lifelong freedom to determine my own destination. He did not fear that I might err, nor was he anxious that I might suffer for it. He held before us the ideal of life, but he never raised the rod of chastisement.

I would often tell Father stories about the household. Whenever I received a letter from anyone at home, I would show it to him at once. Surely he received from me many glimpses that no one else had any chance of receiving.

When any letter came from my elder brother or second brother, he would have me read it to him. This was how I learned the manner in which letters ought to be written to him. He considered this kind of practical education in worldly conventions especially necessary.

I remember well that once, in a letter from my second brother, there was a passage about how he was labouring at his work, sacrificing himself. Father asked me the meaning of a few sentences from that passage. The meaning I gave did not accord with his own understanding—he interpreted it differently. But I had such stubbornness that I refused to accept his interpretation. I argued with him about it at some length. Anyone else would surely have silenced me with a sharp rebuke, but he bore all my objections with patience and tried to make me understand.

He would tell me many amusing stories. I heard from him much about the ways of great households in the old days. I heard tales of how, since the border of Dhaka cloth felt coarse against the skin, the fashionable gentlemen of those times would tear off the border before wearing the cloth. Because the milkman diluted the milk with water, a servant was appointed to inspect the milk, and then a second inspector was appointed to inspect the work of the first. As the number of inspectors kept increasing in this way, the colour of the milk grew ever thinner and gradually became as transparent-blue as a crow's eye—and, when giving his account, the milkman informed the master that if inspectors were increased any further, snails, mussels and shrimp would inevitably start appearing in the milk. I first heard this story from his own lips and found it enormously entertaining.

Thus, after some months had passed in this manner, Father sent me back to Calcutta in the care of his attendant, Kishori Chatterjee.

RETURN

The discipline within whose confines I had once been so cramped shattered utterly at the time of my journey to the Himalayas. When I returned, I found my domain had expanded greatly. The one who remains constantly before one's eyes is scarcely noticed at all; only after going far away from the field of vision and returning does one at last fall under the household's gaze—and so it was that this time I fell under the notice of everyone at home.

On my return journey, my fortunes began receiving special attention along the very railway line. Wearing a golden-embroidered cap, travelling alone as a young boy—accompanied only by a single servant—my body had grown plump with the abundance of good health. Wherever, along the way, any sahib or memsahib boarded the train, they would not leave without fussing over me.

When I arrived home, it was not merely that I had returned from a journey abroad—I had, in coming into the interior of the house, emerged from an exile I had been suffering all this while even as I lived at home.

I came into the interior of the house. The barriers of the inner apartments had dissolved; the servants' quarters could no longer contain me. I claimed a rather grand seat in the assembly of Mother's chamber. And from her who was then the youngest daughter-in-law of our household, I received abundant affection and attention.

In childhood, the affection and care of women comes to a person unsought. Just as light and air are necessary to a child, so too is the attention of these women equally essential to him. But just as no one particularly notices that he is receiving light and air, so it is natural for children to give no such thought to women's care either. Rather, children fidget to cut themselves loose from such webs of care and break

free. But when what is ordinarily easily obtained is suddenly withheld, a person becomes wretched. This happened to me. Having grown up under the servants' rule in the outer apartments in childhood, when I suddenly found myself receiving the abundant affection of the women, I could not forget that thing any longer. In my childhood, when the inner apartments lay distant from us, I had unconsciously created my own imaginary world there. That place which in our language is called obarodh (seclusion)—there I saw the ending of all bonds. I imagined: there is no school there, no schoolmaster forcing anyone into anything against their will—the secluded leisure there is deeply mysterious—there no one has to account for the passing of every hour of the day, all play and pastime follow one's own will. In particular, I observed that though Chhorodidi studied with us under that same Nilkamal Pandit-moshai, whether she recited her lesson or not made no difference in how she was regarded. At ten o'clock, we would eat hastily and prepare ourselves like good children to go off to school—seeing her, unconcerned, having her hair plaited and sauntering off carelessly into the interior of the house, my heart would grow heavy. Then, later, when a golden necklace was placed round her neck and the new bride came into the house, the mystery of the inner apartments grew even denser. She who had come from outside and yet belonged to the house, whom I did not know at all and yet who was my own—with her I very much wished to strike up an intimacy. But whenever I found some opportunity to draw near, Chhorodidi would chase me off, saying, "What have you come here for? Go away, go outside"—then disappointment on one hand, insult on the other, and both feelings would swell greatly in my mind. Then again, I would see, arranged behind the glass doors of their cabinet, what rare treasures of glass and china—what colours, what ornamentation! We were never worthy of touching them—we never even dared to ask to look at them. But these rare and beautiful objects made the inaccessibility of the inner apartments all the more colourful to my mind.

Thus, kept at a distance in this way, my whole life passed by. Just as the world of nature outside remained distant from me, so too did the inner apartments of the house. That is why, whatever little I did see of it seemed to fall upon my eyes like a picture. After finishing my lessons with the night-tutor past nine o'clock, I would go into the house to sleep—the long slatted veranda glimmering with a dim lantern—crossing that veranda, descending some four or five dark steps, I would arrive at

the courtyard-enclosed veranda of the inner apartments—on the west side of that veranda, moonlight would come slanting in from the eastern sky—the rest of the veranda dark—in that little patch of moonlight the household maidservants would sit side by side, legs stretched out, twisting wicks for the lamps upon their thighs, murmuring quietly among themselves of their own native villages—such pictures as these remain etched once and for all in my mind. Then, after dinner at night, having washed our feet with water poured on the outer veranda, the three of us would lie down together on a large bed. Shankari, or Pyari, or Tinkori would come and sit near our pillow and tell tales of a prince's wanderings across the endless plain—when that story ended, the bed would fall silent—turning my face toward the wall, I would see in the faint light how, here and there, the plaster had flaked from the wall, leaving strange markings upon the black surface; from these markings I would conjure up in my mind all manner of curious pictures as I drifted off to sleep. Then, in the middle of the night, on some nights, half-asleep, I would hear old Svarup-sardar going from one veranda to another, calling out loudly.

In that little-known, imagination-woven interior of the house, one day I received the long-awaited affection of many days. What I usually received in small measures day by day, and which through this daily repetition had grown commonplace, I now suddenly received all at once, along with its accumulated arrears—and I cannot say that I was able to bear it very gracefully.

The little traveller, having returned home, went about from room to room for some days telling nothing but tales of his travels. Telling and retelling, through friction with imagination, these tales grew gradually so exceedingly loose that it became impossible to reconcile them with the original account. Alas, like everything else, stories too grow old and fade; the capital of glory possessed by the teller of a tale gradually diminishes. And so, as the brightness of the old story kept dimming, it had to be given fresh coats of new colour, one after another.

After returning from the mountains, I gained the chief speaker's position at Mother's fresh-air gathering on the roof. It is difficult to resist the temptation of

achieving fame with one's mother, and gaining such fame is not particularly arduous either.

One day at Normal School, when I first saw in some child's primer that the sun was fourteen hundred thousand times larger than the earth, that very day I proclaimed this fact in Mother's assembly. This proved that what appears small may perhaps not really be so very small after all. I would astonish Mother by memorising verses quoted in our textbook grammar under the section on rhetoric. One of these I still remember—

O my aunt!

Ah, such humility you show,

Coming to fold your hands just so,

Yet why do you brandish that sharp sting!

Recently, from what little knowledge I had gained about the fixed stars from Proctor's book, I began expounding this too in that south-wind-blessed evening gathering.

My father's attendant, Kishori Chatterjee, had once been a singer in a panchali troupe. He would often say to me while we were in the mountains, "Ah, young master, if only I had you, what a troupe I could put together—words fail me." Hearing this, I would grow quite envious—it seemed a fine fortune indeed, to join a panchali troupe and go from land to land, singing songs. From that same Kishori, I learned a number of panchali songs: "O brother, come let us go into the forest with Janaki," "My life has run out, O lotus-eyed one," "How beautiful is the red hibiscus," "Look upon your devotee's feet, O Mother of fearlessness," "Think of Shrikanta, terror of demons, fierce and dreadful in the world's imagining"—these songs would set our little gathering ablaze in a way that no discussion of the sun's fiery outburst or the moon-like nature of Saturn ever could.

While the whole world lived out its days reading Krittibas's Bengali Ramayana, I had come from Father having read the very Ramayana composed by the sage Valmiki himself in the anushtubh metre—this news was able to move Mother more than anything else. Greatly pleased, she said, "Well then, child, read us a little of that Ramayana."

Alas, that mere brief excerpt from the Rijupath, and of that too what I had actually read was very little indeed—and even that, upon attempting to read it, I found had become hazy in places from forgetting. But how could I say "I have forgotten" to a mother who sat eagerly waiting, savouring the joy of her son's extraordinary erudition? And so, in what little I managed to read from the Rijupath, there arose a considerable degree of inconsistency between Valmiki's original composition and my own explanation. From heaven, the compassionate-hearted sage Valmiki surely forgave, with amused and tender affection, that offense committed by an ignorant boy seeking fame before his mother, but Madhusudan, that vanquisher of pride, granted me no such complete reprieve.

Mother thought that I had accomplished something quite impossible, and so, wishing to astonish everyone else as well, she said, "Let us hear Dwijendra once." Then, foreseeing complete disaster, I made vigorous objections in my mind. Mother would not listen to any of it. She sent for my eldest brother. When he arrived, she said, "Listen once to how well Robi has learned to read Valmiki's Ramayana." I had to read it. The merciful Madhusudan, giving but a slight hint of his pride-shattering power, let me off this time. My eldest brother was, I believe, engrossed in some composition of his own—he showed no particular interest in hearing the Bengali explanation. Having listened to just a handful of verses, he said, "Very good," and went away.

After this, going to school became far more difficult for me than before. I began, through various stratagems, to run away from the Bengal Academy.

Enrolment was arranged for me at St. Xavier's; there too, nothing came of it.

My brothers, after making one or two more attempts, gave up all hope for me entirely. They gave up reprimanding me too. One day, my eldest sister said, "We had all hoped that Robi would amount to something on growing up, but it seems his prospects have turned out worse than everyone else's." I understood well enough that my worth was diminishing in the market of respectable society, but even so, I could not somehow bring myself into harmony with that school—an institution surrounded on all sides by life and beauty and yet itself cut off from all such things, a merciless horror resembling something between a jail and a hospital—with its daily recurring toll.

One sacred memory of St. Xavier's remains undimmed in my mind to this day—the memory of the teachers there. Not all our teachers were alike; in particular, the deep humility of true devotion to God I did not perceive in the one or two who taught my class. Rather, they, in the way that teachers generally become mere machines for dispensing education, oppressing children's hearts, could not rise much higher than that. To begin with, the machinery of education is itself a monstrous mechanism; there is no grinding-mill in the world so effective at drying out and crushing human emotional nature as the outward observances of religion. If those who are themselves caught up in that outer aspect of religious practice are, in turn, made to revolve daily upon the wheel of teaching, then nothing worthwhile is produced—among my teachers, I believe there were specimens ground down by this double mill. But even so, there is one memory that stands raised above and dwells in my mind as the ideal of the lives of all St. Xavier's teachers. My acquaintance with Father de Peneranda was not particularly extensive—I believe he worked for some time as a substitute for our regular teacher. He was Spanish by birth. He had considerable difficulty with English pronunciation. I believe it was for this reason that the students paid little attention to his teaching in class. It seemed to me that he felt within himself the wound of that indifference from his students, but bore it humbly, day after day. I do not know why, but a certain ache would arise in my mind on his behalf. His features were not handsome, but he held some

strange attraction for me. Looking at him, one felt that he was always, within himself, silently offering up some form of worship to God—that he seemed wrapped in a vast and dense inner stillness. Half an hour was allotted for us to write in our copybooks—I would sit with pen in hand, absent-minded, thinking of this and that. One day Father de Peneranda was supervising this class. He was walking up and down behind each bench. I believe he had noticed two or three times that my pen was not moving. At one point he stopped behind me, and bending down, placed his hand upon my back, and asked me with the greatest tenderness, "Tagore, are you not feeling well?" It was nothing particular, but to this day I have not forgotten that question of his. I cannot speak for the other students, but I could see within him a certain greatness of mind—even today, remembering it, I feel as though I am granted the privilege of entering some quiet, silent temple of the divine.

At that time there was another elderly teacher whom the students particularly loved. His name was Father Henry. He taught the upper classes; I did not know him well. But I remember one thing about him worth mentioning. He knew Bengali. He once asked a student in his class named Nirad, "What is the etymology of your name?" As for himself, Nirad had always been perfectly unconcerned—he had never given a moment's anxious thought to the etymology of his name—and so he was entirely unprepared to answer such a question. But among the great host of unfamiliar words in the dictionary, to be caught out on one's own name seemed like being crushed under one's own carriage—so, with an unruffled countenance, Nirad answered at once: "Ni + hil roda (that from which rain is lifted away), nirad—that is, that which, when it rises, leaves no rain behind, that is nirad [cloud]."

LESSONS AT HOME

Anandachandra Vedantabagish's son, Jnanachandra Bhattacharya Mahashay, was our tutor at home. When he found he could not tie me down by any means to school lessons, he abandoned that approach and took another path. He began teaching me the Kumarasambhavam with Bengali explanation. Besides this, he would explain some portion of Macbeth to me in Bengali and keep me confined to the room until I had translated that portion into Bengali verse. The translation of the entire book was actually completed. Fortunately, it was later lost, which lightened the burden of that particular karmic debt by that much.

Ramsarvasva Panditmoshai bore the responsibility for our Sanskrit instruction. Giving up the futile attempt to teach grammar to an unwilling pupil, he taught me the Shakuntala with explanation. He once took me to Vidyasagar Mahashay so that I might recite my translation of Macbeth for him. At that time Rajkrishna Mukhopadhyay was sitting there. My heart pounded as I entered his book-filled room—I cannot say that seeing his face increased my courage any. I had never before had a listener like Vidyasagar—and so my desire to gain fame from this occasion was very strong indeed. I believe I returned home having gathered some confidence from the experience. I remember Rajkrishna Babu advised me that the demoness's utterances in the play should have some peculiarly distinct quality of language and metre, compared to the other portions of the drama.

In my childhood, the body of Bengali literature was quite meagre. I believe that in those days, I had finished off nearly every Bengali book there was, whether suitable for children or not. In those times, no particular distinction was made between books for children and books for adults. This did not, I think, cause us any particular harm. Nowadays, the children's books written by diluting literary flavour with an excess of water treat children as utterly childish. Children are not regarded as human beings at all. There seems to be a rule that whatever book a child reads, he should understand some of it and not understand the rest. We, in our childhood, read books straight through from the start—what we understood and what we did

not understand, both worked equally upon our minds. The world too acts upon children in precisely this manner. Whatever of it they understand, that much they gain; and even what they do not understand pushes them forward all the same.

When Dinabandhu Mitra Mahashay's farce "The Son-in-Law's Household" was published, we had not yet reached the age to read that book. Some distant relative of mine was reading that very volume. Despite much pleading, I could not obtain it from her. She kept the book locked in a box. My enthusiasm grew all the greater from being forbidden, and I threatened her, saying, "I will read this book, no matter what."

At midday, she was playing a game of cards—the bunch of keys tied to her sari-end hung down her back. I never had any inclination for card games—I found them particularly tedious. But that day, my own conduct would have been hard for anyone to predict. I sat as still as a picture. At a moment when the game had grown quite tense, with some player facing the possibility of imminent defeat, I slowly attempted to unfasten the key from her sari-end. But my fingers lacked skill in this task, and moreover there was an eager tremor in my hand—I was caught red-handed. Laughing, the key's owner lowered her sari-end from her back, placed the key upon her lap, and returned her attention to the game.

I now devised another strategy. This relative of mine had a habit of chewing betel-leaf. I gathered a plate of prepared betel-leaf from somewhere and placed it before her. Exactly as I had hoped, so it happened. She had to get up to spit out the betel-juice; the sari-end, key and all, slipped from her lap and fell to the floor, and, as was her habit, she immediately picked it up and threw it over her back. This time the key was stolen away and the thief went undetected. The book was read. Afterward, I returned the key and the book to their rightful owner, thereby saving myself from the jurisdiction of theft's punitive laws. My relative attempted to scold me, but not with due severity—she was inwardly laughing—and I found myself in much the same condition.

Rajendralal Mitra Mahashay used to publish an illustrated monthly magazine called Bibidhartha Sangraha. A bound volume of it was in Sejda's bookcase. This I gathered for myself. I still remember today the pleasure of reading that book again and again. Clutching that thick, square volume to my chest, lying flat on my back on the mattress of our sleeping-room, how many holiday afternoons I passed reading accounts of frolicking whales, the amusing story of the Kazi's judgment, and the novel Krishnakumari.

Why is there not a single magazine of this kind today? Modern magazines are filled on one side with science, philosophy, and archaeology, and on the other with abundant stories, poems, and trivial travel narratives. I do not see a middle-tier magazine intended for the general public's ordinary leisurely reading. In England, Chambers's Journal, Cassell's Magazine, The Strand Magazine, and other such widely-circulated periodicals are all engaged in the service of the general reader. From their storehouse of knowledge, they regularly supply the whole country with coarse rice and coarse cloth. It is precisely this coarse rice and coarse cloth that serves the greater part of the population in most of their needs.

In childhood, I became acquainted with another small magazine. Its name was Abodhbandhu. Taking its unbound issues out from my elder brother's bookcase, I have spent many days sitting by the open door of his south-facing room, reading and reading. It was in this very magazine that I first read the poetry of Bihari Lal Chakraborty. Of all the poetry of that time, his moved me the most. His verses played upon my heart, in the simple tune of a flute, the songs of field and forest. It was also in this Abodhbandhu magazine that I read the delightful Bengali translation of the English story "Paul and Virginia," and I cannot say how many tears I shed over it. Ah, upon what shore of what sea! What forest of coconut trees trembling in that sea's very breeze! What valley of that goat-grazed hill! In the southern veranda of a house in Calcutta city, at noon, in the heat of the sun, what a sweet mirage it used to spread before me! And with that Virginia, wearing a colourful kerchief upon her head, in the green forest-paths of that lonely island, what love had blossomed in the heart of one Bengali boy.

At last came Bankim's Bangadarshan, and it captured the Bengali heart entirely. To begin with, we would wait for it month after month with anticipation, and beyond that, waiting for the elders to finish reading it was even harder to endure. Bishabriksha, Chandrashekhar—nowadays anyone may read these effortlessly, in a single sitting, all at once. But we, waiting month after month, longing, anticipating, weaving the brief reading of small portions through long stretches of leisurely reflection, threading satisfaction with dissatisfaction, enjoyment with curiosity, for so many days at a stretch—no one will ever again get the chance to read in such a fashion.

The collection of ancient poetry compiled by the venerable Sharadacharan Mitra and Akshay Sarkar Mahashay was, in those days, an object of great temptation to me. My elders were subscribers to it but were not regular readers. And so, gathering these volumes together did not cost me much trouble. Vidyapati's difficult, distorted Maithili verses drew my attention all the more precisely because they were so obscure. Rather than relying on the commentary, I tried to understand them for myself. Whenever any particularly difficult word appeared, however many times it was used, I would note it all down in a small bound notebook. I also jotted down, according to my own understanding, whatever grammatical points I could manage.

THE HOUSEHOLD ATMOSPHERE

One great advantage of my childhood was this: the household breathed the very air of literature, day and night. I remember, when I was quite a small child, how I would sometimes stand quietly holding the veranda railing in the evening. The drawing-room facing us would be lit up, people would be moving about, large carriages would come and stand at the gate. I did not really understand what was happening—I would simply stand in the dark and gaze at that garland of lights. Though the actual distance separating us was not great, still it was, from my childhood world, a very distant light indeed. My cousin Ganendra-dada was, at that time, having Ramnarayan Tarkaratna write new plays and staging their performances at home. His enthusiasm for literature and the fine arts knew no bounds. He and his companions seemed to be trying, from every direction, to awaken the modern age of Bengal. In dress and ornament, in poetry and song, in painting and drama, in religion and patriotism—in every field—an ideal of complete, all-encompassing nationalism was awakening in their minds. Ganen-dada had an extraordinary passion for the study of the history of every land in the world. He began writing many histories in Bengali and left them unfinished. A translation of his drama Vikramorvashi was published long ago. His composed Brahmo hymns still occupy the highest place among devotional songs.

Sing, O sing His name,
Whose creation is the entire universe,
Whose mercy knows no pause,
Flowing ceaselessly, unbroken—

That celebrated song is his. It was he and his companions who first laid the foundation of patriotic songs and poems in Bengali. How long ago is that day now, when Ganen-dada's composed song "How can I sing of India's glory in shame" used to be sung at the Hindu Mela? Ganen-dada died young; my age then was very tender indeed. But once one had seen his handsome, dignified, radiant, fair-

complexioned figure, there was no possibility of ever forgetting it. He possessed an immense influence—a social influence. He could draw everyone around him, could bind them together—by the force of his attraction, nothing in the domestic world could ever break apart and scatter into fragments.

In our country, one occasionally finds a man of this sort. By some special force in their character, they come, with perfect ease, to occupy the centre of an entire family or village. Had such men been born in a country where large organisations are constantly being formed for political affairs, commerce, or various kinds of public work, they would naturally have become national leaders. To bring many people together and construct out of them one or another institution is a particular kind of genius. In our country, that genius merely does its work obscurely within one or another great family and then vanishes without recognition. It seems to me that in this way, a vast amount of power goes wasted—it is as if a star were plucked down from its celestial realm to be used merely for striking matches.

I remember well his younger brother Gunen-dada. He too kept the household filled to the brim. He would surround relatives, friends, dependents, guests both invited and uninvited, in the embrace of his boundless generosity. On his southern veranda, in his southern garden, at the assembly for fishing by the bound ghat of the pond, he presided like the very embodiment of southern warmth and hospitality. His appreciation of beauty and his generosity of spirit made his sturdy body and mind seem to overflow constantly. Various schemes of dramatic entertainment and festive amusement, taking shelter under his patronage, sought ever new expressions of development. Owing to the disadvantages of our childhood status, we could not always take part in all these undertakings of theirs—but waves of enthusiasm would come from every direction to strike constantly upon the shores of our curiosity. I remember well how my eldest brother once composed some strange comic drama—rehearsals for it were held every day at noon in Gunen-dada's large drawing-room. We would stand on this house's veranda and, through the open window, catch snatches of some strange song mingled with peals of laughter, and would also catch glimpses of Akshay Majumdar Mahashay's wild dancing. One portion of the song I still remember—

Don't speak of that, don't speak of it,
This is a most laughable matter, laughable matter,
People will laugh—
Ha, ha, ha, people will laugh

To this day I have never learned what that laughable matter actually was—but the hope that someday I would find out kept my mind pleasantly agitated.

I recall now how, through one utterly trivial incident, I managed to awaken Gunen-dada's affection for me in a particular way. I never once won a prize at school—only once did I receive a book of verse as an award for good character. Among the three of us, Satya was truly the best at his studies. Once, having passed an examination well, he won a prize; that day, returning from school, the moment I stepped down from the carriage, I ran off to give Gunen-dada the news. He was sitting in the garden. I shouted from a distance and proclaimed, "Gunen-dada, Satya has won a prize." Laughing, he drew me close and asked, "Didn't you win a prize?" I said, "No, I did not win one—Satya won it." At this Gunen-dada was greatly pleased. That I should be so enthusiastic about someone else winning the prize of truth, even though I myself had won no prize, seemed to him a mark of a particularly noble quality. He repeated this remark, in my very presence, to other people. There was nothing praiseworthy in the matter at all—it had never occurred to me either—and I was astonished to receive such sudden praise from him. Thus I came to see that it is good to be denied the prize of prizes, but the giving of prizes itself is not good—children should look outward rather than at themselves, this being better for their moral health.

After the midday meal, Gunen-dada would come to this house to hold court—his gathering was very much like a club: work was scarcely separated from jest and laughter. Gunen-dada would recline upon a couch in the assembly room—taking

that opportunity, I would slowly come and sit near his lap. He would often tell me stories from the history of India. I found it very strange indeed to hear from him that Clive, having established British rule in India, eventually returned home and, cutting his own throat, ended his life. On one hand India's new history was thus unfolding, but on the other, what mystery of anguish lay hidden in the darkness of that man's heart? How could such barrenness exist within, when there was such simple success without? I pondered much on that day. On some days Gunen-dada could tell, from my restless demeanour, that I had some notebook hidden in my pocket. With just a little encouragement, that notebook would come shamelessly out from its hiding place. Needless to say, he was a very harsh critic—indeed, his opinions could well have been used in advertisements. Yet I remember well that on some days my poems contained such an excess of childishness that he would burst into peals of laughter. I had once written a poem about Mother India. At the end of one line was the word "nikate" (near). I could not manage to dispense with that word, yet by no means could I find any suitable rhyme for it. In desperation, in the following line, I had inserted the word "shakate" (cart). There was absolutely no natural way for a cart to arrive at that point—but the demand of rhyme would not listen to any explanation, and so, without any reason whatsoever, I had to bring a cart onto the scene at that spot. Amid Gunen-dada's uproarious laughter, that cart, horse and all, having come by such an impassable road, vanished to who knows where—to this day, no further trace of it has ever been found.

My eldest brother was then, spreading out his bedding on the southern veranda, writing "Swapnaprayan" (Dream Journey) with a small desk in front of him. Gunen-dada too would come and sit every morning on that same southern veranda of ours. His abundant joy in relishing the poetry acted like a spring breeze upon the flowering of poetic creation. My eldest brother would write and recite aloud, and the veranda would shake with his peals of resounding laughter. Just as, in spring, mango blossoms fall untimely in abundance, scattering to cover the ground beneath the trees, so too countless discarded pages of Swapnaprayan lay strewn about the house—there is no counting how many. My eldest brother's poetic imagination had such abundant vital energy that he produced far more than was ever needed. For this reason he would throw away a great deal of what he wrote.

Had these been collected and kept, they would have filled an entire basket of Bengali literature.

We too were not deprived of our share in this feast of poetic pleasure, gleaned from the corners and edges of that time. So much was scattered about that even we, like servants, received our portion of the leavings. From my eldest brother's pen at that time flowed a very flood-tide of rhythm, language, and imagination—the tide would roar in, and with each fresh, unrestrained wave's tumultuous roar, both banks would resound. Did we truly understand all of Swapnaprayan? But as I have said before, complete understanding is not necessary in order to receive benefit. Whether I obtained the ocean's jewels, I do not know; even if I did, I did not understand their worth—but I drank my fill of the waves to my heart's content—and by the very shock of that joy, the current of life grew restless in every vein and artery of my being.

However much I think of those times now, one particular thought keeps recurring to my mind: in those days there existed a thing called majlis (gathering, social assembly)—that thing no longer exists now. There was a certain intimate sociability in earlier times, and I feel we, in our childhood, witnessed only its final fading glow. The mingling of people with one another was then very close-knit, and so the majlis was an absolutely essential feature of that age. Those who were sociable, convivial persons, were held in special regard then. Nowadays people come for business, come to pay a visit, but do not come to hold a majlis. People have no time, and that closeness no longer exists. In those days I used to see such constant coming and going in the house—the veranda and the drawing-room would resound with laughter and conversation. To gather together, from all quarters, this variety of people, to build up laughter and conversation—this was itself a kind of power—and that very power seems to have vanished, no one knows where. People still exist, but those same verandas, those same drawing-rooms, seem now entirely deserted. All the furnishings and arrangements and ceremonial observances of that time were meant for the many—and so whatever grandeur they possessed was never excessive. The mansions of today's wealthy are far grander than those of that earlier age, but they are without mercy—they do not know how to extend an

unstinting, indiscriminate welcome. An open shirt, a soiled shawl, and a smiling face cannot, without formal invitation, enter and claim a seat there. We, nowadays, in building and decorating our houses in imitation of such people, following their own methods, find that they too have their societies, and their sociability too is quite extensive. Our difficulty, I observe, is this: our own social customs have broken down, and there exists no means of constructing the Western social system in their place—in the interval, every household has become joyless. Nowadays, for work's sake, for the country's welfare, we gather ten people together and hold assemblies—but for nothing else; merely to gather ten people together for the sake of gathering ten people, to create various occasions to unite people simply because we find human company pleasing—this has entirely disappeared in modern times. There seems to be no meanness quite so wretched as this immense social parsimony. And so, those who in those days kept the burden of the world lightened for everyone through the sound of their open-hearted laughter now seem, in this present age, to belong to some entirely foreign land.

AKSHAY CHANDRA CHOWDHURY

In my childhood, I found a great and favourable friend for the cultivation of my poetic sensibility. Akshay Chandra Chowdhury Mahashay was a fellow-student and friend of Jyotidada's from their college days. He held an M.A. in English literature. His scholarship in that literature was matched by his devotion to it. On the other hand, his devotion to Bengali literature—to Vaishnava poets, to Kabikankan, Ramprasad, Bharatchandra, Horu Thakur, Rambasu, Nidhubabu, the storyteller Dashu, and others—knew no bounds. He had memorised so many curious old Bengali songs. Whether in tune or out of it, he would sing them however he could, becoming utterly absorbed and swaying with abandon. Even if his listeners raised objections, his enthusiasm remained undiminished. He was equally unrestrained, inwardly and outwardly, in keeping rhythm by tapping along. Whether it was a table or a book, valuable or worthless, whatever came to hand, he would strike it with an incessant series of thumping sounds and set the gathering ablaze with excitement. He had unlimited capacity for enjoying pleasure, and when it came to praising merit wholeheartedly, this man knew no stinginess. His swiftness in composing songs and short poems was extraordinary. And yet he had not the slightest attachment to his own compositions. On countless scraps of paper his pencilled writings lay scattered about, and he never bothered to notice where they went—his talent for composition was matched by an equal indifference toward it. A book of his poems entitled "Udasini" had received considerable praise in the Bangadarshan of that time. I have heard many people singing his songs, and not one of them knew who had composed them.

An unaffected enthusiasm for literary pleasure is far rarer than mere scholarship in literature. Akshay Babu's boundless enthusiasm awakened our own capacity for literary appreciation.

Just as his generosity was evident in matters of literature, so too was it in friendship. In an unfamiliar gathering, he was like a fish thrown up onto dry land, but among those he knew, he made no distinction whatsoever of age or learning.

Among boys, he was a boy himself; when he took leave, late at night, of gatherings of older men, I would often arrest him and drag him off to our schoolroom. There too, under the dim glow of a kerosene lamp, sitting upon our study-table, he never hesitated to set our little assembly ablaze with excitement. In this way I have heard from him countless rapturous explanations of English poetry, have engaged with him in endless debate, discussion and critique. I have recited my own writings to him many times, and if there was even the slightest merit in what I wrote, I have received boundless praise from him for it.

SONG-MAKING

From childhood, in the cultivation of literature, in the practice of feeling, Jyotidada was my chief support—he found joy both in his own enthusiasm and in inspiring enthusiasm in others. I would enter, unhesitatingly, into discussions of feeling and knowledge with him—he never disdained me merely because I was a child.

He gave me a very considerable degree of independence; in his company, my inner shyness dissolved completely. No one else could have dared to give me such independence—perhaps for this some people even blamed him. But just as rain is needed after scorching summer heat, so, for me, after the unrelenting confinement of childhood, this freedom was equally essential. Had this loosening of bonds not occurred at that time, a certain crippling deformity would have remained with me for life. Those in power always find fault with independence by pointing to its misuse, thereby trying to curtail it, but if there is no right to misuse one's freedom, then that freedom cannot properly be called freedom at all. It is only through the misuse of freedom that the true lesson of its proper use comes—that alone is genuine education. At the very least, I can say this with confidence: whatever mischief resulted from my freedom brought me that much closer to learning to prevent mischief on my own. Whatever was given to me through discipline, through oppression, through the twisting of ears and the whispering of admonitions into them, I received nothing at all from it. So long as I had not found my own self within myself, I gained nothing but fruitless suffering. It was Jyotidada who, with complete lack of reserve, left me—through both good and bad alike—in the very field of my self-discovery, and from that time onward my own strength has been able to prepare itself to develop both my own thorns and my own flowers. From this experience of mine, whatever education I have derived from it is such that I do not fear even evil as much as I fear the meddling interference that seeks to enforce goodness—I bow down before the feet of moral and political "punitive police"—there is nothing in the world so wretched as the slavish mentality that this creates.

At one time, Jyotidada became absorbed in composing new melodies on the piano. Every day, with the dance of his fingers, a shower of melodies would pour forth. I and Akshay Babu were engaged in the task of setting words to and thereby fixing these newborn melodies of his. This is how my apprenticeship in song-composition began.

In our family, from earliest childhood, we grew up amid the constant practice of music. This proved advantageous for me in one respect: music entered into my entire nature with the greatest of ease. But it also had its disadvantage. Since I never developed the disciplined habit necessary to master music through deliberate effort, my training never became fully accomplished. In what is properly called musical scholarship, I was never able to gain any real authority.

COMPANION OF LITERATURE

After returning from the Himalayas, the degree of my independence kept steadily increasing. The rule of servants was gone; I broke, through various stratagems, the bonds of school; and at home too, I paid no heed to my tutors. Our previous teacher, Jnanobabu, having taught me some Kumarasambhavam and one or two other things in a haphazard way, went off to practice law. After him came the tutor Brajobabu. On the first day he had me translate from Goldsmith's *Vicar of Wakefield*. That did not seem too bad to me. But then, finding the scope of instruction growing ever more extensive, I became entirely incomprehensible to him.

The household gave up on me entirely. No one—neither I myself nor anyone else—retained any hope that I would ever amount to anything. And so, with no faith placed in anything, I began, in my own private way, simply to fill notebooks with poetry. That writing, too, was of a similar kind. There was nothing else in my mind—only a warm vapour—a foam of that vapour, a froth of that emotion, spinning aimlessly, driven by the pull of idle imagination's whirlpool, wandering without meaning. There was no creation of form in it, only a restless movement. Merely a bubbling up and bursting, a rising and a falling. Whatever substance there was in it was not truly mine—it was imitation of other poets; whatever was truly my own in it was merely a kind of unrest, an unruly inner turmoil. When strength has not yet reached maturity and yet has already gathered momentum, that is the state of a very blind agitation indeed.

My sister-in-law had a passionate love for literature. Whatever Bengali books she read, it was not merely to pass the time—she truly enjoyed them with her whole mind. I was a participant in her literary pursuits.

She held deep reverence and affection for the poem *Swapnaprayan*. I too found this poem very appealing. In particular, since we were living in the very atmosphere

of this poem's composition and discussion, its beauty had woven itself easily into every fibre of my heart. But this poem lay beyond my power of imitation. It never even occurred to me that I might write something of this kind myself.

Swapnaprayan was like some unearthly royal palace of allegory. What varieties of chambers, windows, pictures, statues and ornamental craftsmanship it contained! Its halls too were manifold and varied. In its surrounding gardens, what fountains, what playful pavilions, what bowers, what flowering arbours! In this there was not merely an abundance of feeling, but a vast and varied richness of composition. That power to give complete and full expression to one grand conception through such manifold forms—that, surely, is no easy thing. That I might attempt this and succeed never even arose in my imagination.

At this time, Bihari Lal Chakraborty's Sharadamangal was being published serially in the journal Aryadarshan. My sister-in-law was extremely enamoured of the sweetness of this poem. Much of it she had memorised entirely by heart. She would often invite the poet to dine with her, and had, with her own hand, prepared and offered him a seat of honour.

Through this connection, I too came to know the poet somewhat. He was quite fond of me. At any hour of the day, I would go and present myself at his house. Just as his body was ample, so too was his heart broad and generous. A halo of poetry seemed to circle constantly about his mind, wherever he went—he seemed to possess a subtle, poetry-woven body of his own—that indeed was his true form. Within him dwelt the complete joy of a poet. Whenever I went to him, I came away having breathed in that very joy. In his secluded little room on the third floor, lying face-down on his lined desk-table, murmuring recitations, composing poetry even at midday—many days I have gone to his room while he was in just such a state—though I was but a boy, he would welcome me with such generous warmth of heart that not the slightest hesitation remained in my mind. Then, overcome with feeling, he would recite poetry to me, and sing songs as well. His voice was not particularly melodious, nor was he entirely tuneless—one could guess at what tune he was

attempting. With eyes closed, in a deep, choked voice, he would sing, filling with feeling what his voice failed to reach in melody. I still remember some of those songs from his lips—"The maiden plays in the moon's radiant beam," "Who is that maiden wandering, luminous, through the void of Brahma." I too would sometimes go to sing to him, setting tunes to his songs. He was deeply enraptured by the poetry of Kalidasa and Valmiki.

I remember one day he recited to me, with great expansiveness, the very first verse of Kumarasambhavam, explaining that the numerous long "ah" sounds occurring one after another in it were not accidental—that the poet, from "Devatatma" all the way to "Nagadhiraj," had assembled all these long vowel sounds precisely in order to reveal, through their very expansiveness, the majestic grandeur of the Himalayas.

I would write poetry like Bihari Babu's—my mind's ambition then extended only that far. Perhaps some day I might have come to believe that I was writing poetry just as he did—but the chief obstacle to enjoying this pride was Bihari the poet's own devoted reader—myself. He would constantly remind me of this very verse: "mandah kaviyaśaḥ prārthī" (foolish is he who seeks poetic fame)—that I too was "gamiṣyāmy upahāsyatām" (destined to become a laughingstock). He surely understood that if he indulged my pride, it would become difficult afterward to curb it—and so, not only regarding poetry, but concerning my singing voice as well, he refused in every way to praise me, and would instead compare me to one or two others, saying how sweet their voices were by comparison. In my own mind too, this notion took firm root: that my voice lacked proper sweetness. My confidence regarding my poetic power, too, had been considerably dampened—but this remained my one and only field for gaining self-respect, and so I could not simply abandon hope on account of anyone's remarks—besides, there burned within me a certain fierce, unquenchable urgency, which lay beyond anyone's power to suppress.

THE PUBLICATION OF WRITINGS

Whatever little I had written until now remained confined within its own private circle. It was at this time that a paper named Jnanankur (The Sprouting of Knowledge) came into being. The editors of this paper, true to its sprout-like name, gathered up every scrap of verse I had ever put forth. All my poetic wanderings they began extracting without discrimination. I harbour a fear that someday, when my merits and demerits come up for judgment before the court of Time, these pieces will be summoned to testify, and some zealous constable, dragging them shamelessly out from the forgotten inner chambers of that paper, will parade them before society, paying no heed to any plea of purdah.

The first prose essay I ever wrote was likewise published in this very Jnanankur. It was a review of books, and it has a small history of its own.

At that time a book of verse called Bhubanmohini-pratibha had been published. The book had gained general credence as the work of some lady named Bhubanmohini. In the Sadharani newspaper, the esteemed Akshay Sarkar, and in the Education Gazette, the esteemed Bhudeb Babu, were proclaiming the rise of this poetess with resounding cries of triumph.

I had at that time a friend, older than myself, who would from time to time bring me letters signed "Bhubanmohini" to show me. He had fallen quite under the spell of the poems of "Bhubanmohini," and to the address of "Bhubanmohini" he would send off, nearly every third day, a bundle wrapped in cloth as an offering of devotion.

These poems contained, here and there, such immoderation of feeling and language that I could not bring myself to believe they were the work of a woman's hand. Yet, having seen the letters too, it seemed equally impossible that their

writer could belong to the fair sex. But my doubts did nothing to shake my friend's devotion; his worship of the idol continued unabated.

I then took up three books—Bhubanmohini-pratibha, Dukhsangini, and Abasarsarajini—and wrote a review of them in Jnanankur.

I wrote it with great pomp and ceremony. What were the marks of epic poetry, what were the marks of lyric poetry—all this I discussed with what I imagined to be extraordinary discernment. The convenient thing was that printed letters are all equally impassive; one cannot tell from their faces what manner of writer lies behind them, nor gauge the extent of his learning. My friend came to me in great agitation and said, "A B.A. is writing a reply to this piece of yours." Upon hearing "B.A.," all further speech deserted me. B.A.! The state into which I fell that day was precisely the state I had fallen into once in childhood, when I had genuinely called out to a policeman from the veranda. I saw clearly before my eyes how the whole edifice of fame I had erected regarding epic and lyric poetry was being reduced to dust beneath the merciless blows of grand quotations, and how the path to ever showing my face before the reading public was now closed forever. "Cursed be thy birth, O criticism!" Days passed in an agony of suspense. But the B.A. critic never appeared—no more than that childhood policeman ever had.

THE POEMS OF BHANUSINGHA

I have already mentioned that I read with particular eagerness the collection of ancient verse compiled by the esteemed Akshaychandra Sarkar and Sharadacharan Mitra. Its language, mingled with Maithili, was difficult for me to comprehend. But it was precisely for this reason that I strove with such perseverance to penetrate into it. Just as one feels a peculiar curiosity toward the sprout concealed within a seed and the mystery undiscovered beneath the soil, so I felt exactly that same sentiment toward the compositions of these ancient poets. I was spurred on by the hope that, as I peeled back the covering layer by layer, some rare jewel of poetry might yet catch my eye from within this unfamiliar treasury. And while I was thus engaged in the effort to plumb this mystery and draw forth jewels from its impenetrable darkness, a certain desire seized me—to clothe myself too, for once, in the veil of mystery, and thus present myself to the world.

I had earlier heard from Akshay Babu an account of the English boy-poet Chatterton. What manner of poetry he wrote I did not know—I daresay Akshay Babu himself knew little of the particulars, and had he known more, the charm might well have been dispelled entirely—but there was something so theatrical in the tale itself that it set my imagination ablaze. Chatterton had written poetry in such perfect imitation of ancient poets that many could not detect the deception. At last, at the age of sixteen, this unfortunate boy-poet had taken his own life. Setting aside, for the present, the unnecessary business of that suicide, I girded my loins and set forth to become a second Chatterton.

One day the sky grew heavily overcast by midday. In the joy of that shadowed, cloud-laden leisure, I lay stretched upon a bed in an inner room and, taking up a slate, wrote: "Gahan kusumkunja-majhe" ("Deep within the flowering bower"). Having written it, I felt immensely pleased—so pleased that I went at once to read it to someone whose comprehension could not possibly be touched by the faintest suspicion of understanding. He accordingly nodded his head with great gravity and said, "Well now, this has turned out rather well."

One day I said to the friend mentioned earlier, "While searching through the Society's library, I have come upon an ancient, worm-eaten manuscript, from which I have copied out the verses of some ancient poet named Bhanusingha." So saying, I recited the poems to him. Hearing them, he was thrown into the greatest excitement. He said, "This manuscript I simply must have. Poetry such as this could not have come even from the hand of Vidyapati or Chandidas. I shall give it to Akshay Babu for his collection of ancient verse."

Then, showing him my own notebook, I proved beyond doubt that this writing could not possibly have come from the hand of Vidyapati or Chandidas—for the simple reason that it was my own. My friend, growing grave, said, "It is not at all bad."

When Bhanusingha's poems were being published in Bharati, Dr. Nakshikanta Chattopadhyay happened to be in Germany. He had written a slim volume comparing our country's lyric poetry with European literature. In it, he bestowed upon Bhanusingha, as an ancient poet, an honour so lavish that scarcely any modern poet's fortune could easily match it. By writing this book, he earned his doctorate.

Whoever Bhanusingha truly was, had his writings fallen into my hands today I certainly would not have been deceived—this much I can assert with confidence. It was not impossible to pass off that language as belonging to an ancient poet, for this language was not their mother tongue at all, but an artificial one; different poets, in different hands, had lent it some measure of variation. Yet in the sentiment itself there was no artifice. If Bhanusingha's poetry is struck and tested a little, its counterfeit metal shows through. It lacks the deep-flowing melody of our native wedding-band music; it is nothing more than the cheap, tinny clang of a modern imported organ.

LOVE OF COUNTRY

Viewed from outside, our family observed many foreign customs, yet within the heart of our family a steady flame of devotion to the motherland burned constantly. The heartfelt reverence which our father bore towards his homeland, unshaken through every upheaval of his life, instilled in all of us a powerful love of country. In truth, that era was not one favourable to patriotism. The educated of that time kept both the language and the spirit of the country at arm's length. In our house, the elder brothers had always cultivated the mother tongue. When a new relative of my father's once wrote him a letter in English, that letter was returned to its writer at once.

With the support of our household, a fair called the Hindu Mela had been established. The esteemed Nabagopal Mitra served as the manager of this fair. It was there that the endeavour to conceive of India, with devotion, as one's own motherland, first began. My second brother composed, during that time, the famous national song "Mile shabe Bharatsantan" ("Unite, all children of India"). At this fair, hymns to the nation were sung, poems of patriotic feeling recited, indigenous crafts and feats of physical culture displayed, and worthy sons of the soil honoured.

I have written a prose essay about the Delhi Durbar during Lord Curzon's time—during Lord Lytton's time, I wrote in verse. The English government of that day feared Russia greatly, but felt no fear whatsoever of the pen of a fourteen- or fifteen-year-old boy-poet. Hence, although that poem was full of the excitement natural to my age, no one—from the highest general down to the lowliest police official—showed the slightest sign of disturbance. Nor did any correspondent to the Times raise a heavy sigh of despair over the stability of the British Empire, remarking upon the authorities' indifference to this boy's audacity. I had read it standing beneath a tree at the Hindu Mela. Among the listeners was the esteemed Nabin Sen, who reminded me of this occasion many years later.

At the initiative of my elder cousin Jyotidada, a society was formed among us, with the aged Rajnarayan Babu as its president. This was a society for patriots. It met in a dilapidated house down some lane in Calcutta. All its proceedings were shrouded in secrecy—indeed, this very secrecy was the only truly perilous element in the whole affair. There was nothing in our conduct that either king or subject need have feared. Where we went at midday and what we did there, not even our own relatives knew. Our door was barred, our room darkened, our initiation modelled upon Vedic rites, our speech conducted in whispers—this alone was enough to send a thrill through everyone; nothing more was required. Even one as immature as I was a member of this society. In that assembly we existed in a kind of intoxicated frenzy, as if we soared along on ceaseless enthusiasm. We knew neither shame, fear, nor hesitation. Our chief occupation in this society was the warming of our hands at the fire of excitement. Heroism may sometimes be convenient and sometimes inconvenient, but mankind bears toward it a deep and abiding reverence. To keep that reverence alive, one finds abundant provision in the literature of every land. Whatever condition a man may find himself in, this urge cannot help but stir within him. We civilised ourselves, imagined, conversed, and sang, striving thereby to manage that stirring. There can be no doubt that if all the natural avenues by which what is instinctive and eternally cherished in man might find expression are blocked up, every possible outlet sealed, a grievous distortion is bound to result. Within a vast imperial administration, if only the pathway of clerkship is left open, the varied powers of human character are denied their natural, wholesome field of exercise. Within a nation there must remain a path for valour too, or the very dignity of man is wounded. In its absence, suppressed excitement merely simmers beneath the surface—and there its course becomes exceedingly strange, its proportions beyond calculation. I believe that had the government's suspicion at that time grown truly virulent, the mock-heroics which the boys of our society were merely play-acting might well have turned into grim tragedy. But the performance ran its course; not a single brick of Fort William was shaken loose, and today we laugh as we recall those old memories.

At this gathering, Jyotidada began presenting various models of what might serve as a universal costume for all India. The dhoti was unsuited to active labour, yet trousers seemed foreign; and so he attempted a compromise whereby the dhoti was diminished and the trousers left unsatisfied besides. That is to say, he draped a length of cloth over the trousers and fashioned a peculiar, artificial malkoncha tuck. He mingled the solar hat with the turban to produce an object which not even the most enthusiastic soul could readily call a head-covering. Before any such universal costume could gain universal acceptance, it required a man capable of wearing it alone, unaided—a capacity possessed by no ordinary mortal. Jyotidada, with perfect composure, would don this attire and ride out in his carriage in the full glare of midday sun—relatives, friends, doorkeepers, and coachmen alike would stare in astonishment, yet he never so much as blinked. Many a brave man may exist who would give up his life for his country without hesitation, but a man who could dress in a universal costume of his own devising and drive through the streets of Calcutta for the country's good—such a man is surely rare indeed. Every Sunday, Jyotidada would set out hunting with a party of followers. Whoever joined our band, invited or uninvited, most of them we did not even know—among them were carpenters, blacksmiths, and men of every trade. Of all aspects of this hunting, the actual shedding of blood was by far the least significant; indeed, I scarcely recall such an event ever occurring. Every other feature of the hunt, however, was present in abundant measure—we never felt the slightest want for lack of slain birds or beasts. We would set out early in the morning. Our sister-in-law would prepare heaps of luchis and vegetables to send along with us. Since this particular item did not need to be hunted down and gathered, we never had to go a single day without food.

There is no shortage of overgrown gardens in Maniktala. We would enter whatever garden we chanced upon. Sitting on the paved steps by the pond, high and low without distinction, we would all fall together upon the luchis and, within moments, leave nothing behind but the empty baskets.

Brajababu too was among the foremost enthusiasts of our bloodless hunters. He was superintendent of the Metropolitan College and had for a time been our tutor

at home. One day, returning from the hunt, he entered a garden and called out to the gardener, saying, "I say, has Uncle been to this garden lately?" The gardener, flustered, saluted him and replied, "No sir, master hasn't come." Brajababu said, "Well then, fetch us some coconuts." That day, at least, there was no lack of something to drink after the lunch.

Among our band was a landholder of middling means, a devout Hindu. He had a garden on the bank of the Ganges. There we all civilised gentlemen once dined together, quite disregarding caste and creed. In the afternoon a fierce storm arose. In that storm we stood upon the riverbank and struck up a song at the top of our voices. Rajnarayan Babu's voice could not perhaps navigate the seven notes with any great purity, but he too threw his voice to the winds, and just as commentary often exceeds the original text, so his enthusiastic hand-clapping far outstripped his own thin voice; he tossed his head in time with the rhythm, and the wind of the storm played havoc amid his grey beard. Late that night we returned home by carriage. By then the storm had subsided and the stars had come out. The darkness was deep, the sky still, the village road deserted—only, along the hedgerows on either side, swarms of fireflies were noiselessly scattering handfuls of golden fire.

Establishing factories to manufacture matches and similar goods within the country was one of the objects of our society. For this purpose the members would donate a tenth of their income to the society. Everyone knows how difficult it is to make matches, and how hard it is to obtain the necessary wood; in our country plentiful and cheap heat can be produced through suitable handling of the wood of the khoyra tree, but what burns in such heat is not a match. After many trials, a few boxes of matches were finally produced. Not that they were valuable merely as tokens of the enthusiasm of India's sons—the expense involved in producing just one of our boxes could have kept a village's hearths burning for an entire year. There was, moreover, a slight additional inconvenience: without an existing flame nearby, it was not easy to light them at all. Had ardent devotion to one's country been able to increase their flammability, they would surely still be sold in the market today.

Word came that some young student was attempting to construct a spinning-mill for cloth; we went off to see his machine. None of us possessed the faintest capacity to judge whether the thing was of any practical use—but in our capacity for belief and hope, we were second to none. Some money was owed for the making of the machine, and this we paid off. At last one day I saw Brajababu, a length of towel tied about his head, arrive at the Jorasanko house. "Our mill," he announced, "has produced this scrap of towel!" And saying so, he raised both arms and burst into a wild dance!—by then Brajababu's hair had already begun to turn grey at the roots.

Eventually, one or two sensible men came along and joined our society, fed us the fruit of the tree of knowledge, and that heaven of ours came crashing down.

In our boyhood, when we first came to know Rajnarayan Babu, we lacked the capacity to understand him in every respect. A remarkable assemblage of contradictions had come together in him. Even then his hair and beard had turned almost entirely white, yet he showed no discrepancy in age with even the youngest member of our band. His outward venerability, like a white outer wrapping, had kept the youthfulness within him forever fresh. Even his considerable erudition could do it no harm; he remained, through and through, the simplest of men. To the very end of his life, his abundant laughter would brook no obstacle—neither the gravity of age, nor ill health, nor the sorrows and trials of domestic life, neither learning nor much-heard wisdom, could check the tide of his mirth. On the one hand he had surrendered his entire life and household completely to God; on the other, he was forever devising plans, practicable and impracticable alike, without end, for the betterment of his country. He was Richardson's beloved pupil, a man raised on English learning from boyhood, yet he had overcome every obstacle of unfamiliarity to enter, with full enthusiasm and reverence, into the Bengali language and its literature. In one sense he was a man of the earth, yet in spirit he was utterly aflame. His fervent love for his country was born of that very fire within him. He longed to burn away every trace of degradation, poverty, and humiliation afflicting his motherland. His eyes would blaze, his heart would swell, and, waving

his arms in excitement, he would join us in song—caring not at all whether his voice found the right notes—

In one thread I have bound a thousand hearts,
To one task I have offered a thousand lives.

This god-fearing eternal child, his fiery, laughter-filled life, his sacred youthfulness unmarred by sickness or sorrow, surely deserves to be preserved with honour in the treasury of our nation's memory.

BHARATI

On the whole, this was for me a period of a kind of frenzy. Many a night I deliberately stayed awake till dawn. There was no particular need for this, but I suppose the very fact that sleeping at night seemed the natural thing to do made me inclined to overturn it. In the faint lamplight of our school-room I would sit reading alone in an empty room; far away, a church bell would toll every fifteen minutes—the hours seemed to be auctioned off one by one; from the throats of pilgrims bound for the Nimtala burning-ghat along Chitpur Road would rise, from time to time, the cry of "Haribol!" How many deep summer nights have I wandered, purposeless as a ghost, upon the rooftop terrace, beneath rows of tall trees whose shifting shadows played strangely in the mottled moonlight.

Should anyone suppose all this to be mere poetic fancy, he would be mistaken. The earth had an age when frequent earthquakes and volcanic eruptions were its natural state. Even now, in the earth's mature age, such tremors occasionally show themselves, and men marvel at them; but in its early age, when the crust was not yet so hardened and the inner vapour was in far greater abundance, unforeseeable eruptions raged constantly. The onset of youth is a similar affair. Whatever materials go into the building of a life, so long as the foundation is not yet firmly set, those very materials continue to create disturbance.

It was during this very period that Jyotidada resolved to bring out the journal Bharati, with my eldest brother as editor. This became yet another source of intense excitement for us. My age then was exactly sixteen. Yet I was by no means outside the circle of Bharati's contributors. Even before this, I had, with all the impetuosity of youth, written a scathing review of Meghnad-badh. The juice of a raw mango is sour; a raw critique likewise turns to mere abuse. When other faculties are weak, the capacity for stinging retort grows unusually sharp. I too was seeking the surest and easiest means of immortalising myself by sinking my claws into this immortal epic. It was with this arrogant piece of criticism that I began writing for Bharati.

In this same first year of Bharati, I also published a poem entitled Kabi-kahini (The Poet's Tale). At the age when a writer has not yet properly observed the rest of the world, and merely magnifies the shadow-image of his own unformed self—this was written at just such an age. That is why its hero is a poet. That poet is not the true self of the writer—he is what the writer wishes to imagine and proclaim himself to be. Nor even quite that—he is what the writer feels he ought to wish to be; that is, the figure such that, upon witnessing it, ten other people would nod their heads and say, "Yes indeed, that is a true poet." There is a great deal of universal love proclaimed in it—for the young poet this is a most convenient theme, since it sounds grand to hear and is easy enough to voice. When truth has not yet awakened within one's own mind, and the words of others remain one's chief resource, it becomes impossible to preserve simplicity and restraint in one's writing. Then, in the desperate effort to make what is naturally great appear even greater from the outside, it inevitably becomes distorted and ridiculous. When I feel embarrassment upon reading these juvenile compositions now, it occurs to me to fear that in the writings of my mature years too there must surely lurk, more subtly concealed, much of this same distortion and vulgarity born of excessive striving. In trying to speak a grand thing in an even grander voice, I have doubtless often destroyed its peace and dignity. Surely, on many occasions, my own voice has risen above the matter I meant to convey, and that hollow pretense will one day be caught out by Time.

This very Kabi-kahini was the first of my works to be published in book form. While I was staying with my second brother in Ahmedabad, some enthusiastic friend of mine, without my knowledge, had this book printed and sent to me, taking me quite by surprise. I do not think he did me any favour by this act, but the surge of feeling I experienced then can by no means be called a fierce desire to punish him for it. Punishment there indeed was, but it fell not upon the writer, but upon those who purchased the book from the booksellers. It is said that the unsold stock of that book lay for a very long time upon the shop's shelves, weighing heavily upon the bookseller's mind, ever-present and unyielding.

The writing I began in Bharati at that age could not possibly deserve publication. There are many pitfalls in publishing what one writes in childhood—there is no remedy so effective for cultivating regret in one's mature years. But it carries with it one disadvantage: an overpowering fascination with seeing one's own writing in print takes hold of one at too tender an age, consuming it. To fret over who read one's work and what they said of it, to be tormented over some misprint in some corner of the text—these are afflictions of authorship best endured and shed in childhood, so that one may write with a calmer mind in later years, relatively free of such distraction. The sooner one is delivered from this infatuated state of parading one's printed words before all the world, the better.

Young Bengali literature had not yet attained such breadth and influence that the discipline inherent within it could keep its writers in check. Writing on and on, one must gradually evolve this restraint from within oneself. This inevitably means giving birth, over a long period, to a great deal of rubbish. In one's green years, unless one can perform some extraordinary feat with slight means, the mind will not rest content; and so an excess of posturing, and at every step a tendency to transgress far beyond both one's natural capacity and the bounds of truth and beauty besides, shows itself in one's writing. To recover from this state, to gain confidence in exactly the measure of one's own true capacity—this comes about only with the passage of time.

Be that as it may, much of the shame of my childhood follies lies etched, page after page of Bharati, in printer's ink. Not shame merely for immature writing—but shame for insolent lack of modesty, strange excess, and ostentatious artifice.

For most of what I wrote I suppose I ought to feel shame, but the surge of enthusiasm that swelled within me at that time was, I am certain, of no small worth. That period was indeed a time for making mistakes, but it is also the time of life for believing, for hoping, for rejoicing—that is boyhood. If those errors served as fuel for the flame of enthusiasm, then whatever was destined to turn to ash will indeed

turn to ash—but the true work of that fire shall never, in this life, prove to have been in vain.

AHMEDABAD

When Bharati entered its second year, my second brother proposed that he would take me to England. When my father consented, I was astonished at this further, unsought act of generosity from the hand of fate.

Before setting off for England, my second brother first took me to Ahmedabad, where he was serving as a judge. My sister-in-law and her children were then in England, so the house stood, in a manner of speaking, quite empty.

The judge's residence was at Shahibagh—a palace of the Mughal era, built for the emperor himself. At the base of this palace's outer wall, the shallow, clear-flowing summer stream of the Sabarmati River flowed along one edge of its sandy bed. Facing the river, on the front side of the palace, stretched a vast open terrace. My brother would go off to court each day. In that immense house there would be no one but myself—the only sound to be heard within its walls was the midday cooing of pigeons. I would then wander, driven by a strange, causeless curiosity, from empty room to empty room. Along one wall of a large room, my brother's books had been arranged in various niches. Among them was a volume of Tennyson's poetry, printed in large type and richly illustrated. That book too, for me at that time, was as silent as this very royal palace. I could only wander again and again among its illustrations. It is not that I understood the verses not at all—but for me they were far more akin to the cooing of doves than to actual speech. In the library there was another book—a collection of ancient Sanskrit poetry printed at Serampore, compiled by Dr. Haeberlin. But comprehending Sanskrit poems was quite beyond me. Yet the sound of Sanskrit sentences and the movement of their metre have wandered through my mind on many a summer noon, amid the deep, sonorous laments of Amaru's hundred verses.

At the top of this Shahibagh palace, in a small room beneath the very pinnacle, I had my refuge. Only a hive-full of wasps shared this room with me. At night I would

sleep in that solitary chamber—now and again, in the darkness, a wasp or two would drop from the hive onto my bed; when I turned over, they would take no pleasure in it, and it would prove sharply unpleasant for me too. Wandering alone at night, in the dark fortnight, upon that vast terrace facing the river, was another affliction that befell me. It was during these nocturnal excursions upon that terrace that I composed, for the very first time, songs set to my own tunes. Among these, the song "Boli o amar golapbala" ("Speak, oh my rose-girl") still retains its place in my collected poems today.

Being entirely raw in English, I began spending my days poring over a dictionary, reading various English books. From childhood I had a habit—even without complete comprehension, my reading was never hindered by it. Whatever little I grasped, I would build something out of it in my own mind, and thus manage to carry on reasonably well. Both the good and bad effects of this habit I have continued to experience even to this day.

ENGLAND

Thus, having spent some six months in Ahmedabad and Bombay, we set out for England. At an inauspicious hour, I had begun sending accounts of my voyage to England, first to relatives and later to Bharati. It is no longer within my power to make these vanish. Most of these letters exhibit nothing but the bravado of boyhood—an attempt to make fireworks of composition by expressing disdain, delivering blows, arguing points. That the capacity to revere, to accept, to gain entry—that this alone is the greatest of all powers, and that through the very avenue of humility one may extend one's dominion further than by any other means—this the young mind does not care to comprehend. To feel pleasure, to offer praise, seems somehow a kind of defeat, a weakness—and so this attempt to establish one's superiority purely through stinging retort would seem laughable to me today, were its arrogance and artificiality not so painful to bear. From childhood I had had, one might almost say, no connection whatsoever with the outer world. And then suddenly, at the age of seventeen, to be cast adrift upon the ocean of English society—there was every likelihood I would flounder badly. But my second sister-in-law was then living with her children in Brighton—taking shelter with her, that first shock of foreign life never quite touched me.

Winter had by then set in. One night, sitting by the fire in a room engaged in conversation, the children came rushing in excitedly to announce that snow was falling. Going outside, I saw the biting cold, the pure moonlight in the sky, and the earth blanketed in white snow. This was not the same familiar face of the earth I had known all my life—it seemed like a dream, like something altogether other—all that was near seemed to have receded into distance; a white-robed, motionless ascetic, as it were, wrapped in the veil of deep meditation. Never before, simply upon stepping outside a door, had I beheld such astonishing, boundless beauty.

Under my sister-in-law's care, and amid the children's varied mischief and pranks, my days passed pleasantly enough. The children found great amusement in my curious English pronunciation. In every other kind of play there was no obstacle

from me at all, but in this particular amusement I could never join wholeheartedly. That such-and-such a word should have such-and-such a sound while another, similarly spelled, should have quite another—this was simply not something to be grasped by ordinary common sense, and I hardly knew how to explain this to children. Poor unfortunate me, their laughter fell entirely upon my head, though the fault, in truth, lay wholly with English orthography. I devised new ways each day to amuse these two small children, to make them laugh, to give them pleasure. The need to exercise this inventive power of pleasing children has arisen many times since in my life—that need has not yet passed. But I no longer feel that same abundant profusion of that power. That was the first time in my life I had the opportunity to give my heart freely to children—and so the offering, made manifest, was so richly and variously fulfilled.

But it was not, after all, to leave one room on this side of the ocean merely to enter another room on the far side that I had set out on my journey. The plan was that I should study, become a barrister, and return home. And so, one day, I was enrolled in a public school in Brighton. On my very first day at school, the headmaster looked at my face and exclaimed, "Bravo, what a splendid head you have!" This small remark has stayed in my memory for the reason that, back home, there was one person most eager to deflate my pride—he took particular care to explain to me that my forehead and countenance could, by no means, be reckoned even middling by comparison with most others in the world. I hope readers will credit it as a virtue in me that I believed his words entirely, and, feeling sorrowful over the various niggardly failings of the Creator with regard to my person, remained silent about it. In this way, as I gradually began to notice one or two points of difference between his opinion and that of the people of England, I would often reflect gravely that perhaps the standards and methods of judgment in the two countries were altogether different.

One thing about this Brighton school struck me with wonder—the students showed not the slightest rudeness in their behaviour toward me. Often they would stuff my pockets with oranges, apples, and the like, and run off before I noticed. That this was on account of my being a foreigner, I have always believed.

My time at this school too did not last long—though this was through no fault of the school's. At that time, the esteemed Tarak Palit was in England. He came to understand that I would never amount to much through such an arrangement. He spoke to my brother and had me brought to London, where he first left me alone in lodgings. This lodging was situated directly opposite Regent's Park. It was then the depth of winter. Not a single leaf remained on the garden trees before it—only rows of bare, gnarled, snow-covered branches stood in ranks, gazing up at the sky as if in mute supplication. Seeing this, a chill seemed to creep even into my bones. For a newly arrived exile, no place could be more mercilessly cold than winter London. There was not a single acquaintance nearby, nor did I know my way about the streets. Once more, the days of sitting alone in a room in silence, staring outward, returned to my life. But now the outside world offered nothing pleasant—its brow was furrowed, the colour of the sky dull, the light as lifeless as a dead man's eyes; the ten directions had drawn themselves inward, and there was no expansive invitation anywhere in the world. There was scarcely any furniture in the room. By some strange chance, there stood a harmonium. When evening fell early and darkness came on, I would play that instrument to myself for hours. Occasionally some fellow-countryman from India would come to call upon me. My acquaintance with them was slight indeed. But when, after taking their leave, they rose to depart, I would find myself wishing I could seize hold of their coats and drag them back into the room to sit with me a while longer.

While staying in this lodging, a certain man came to teach me Latin. He was extremely thin—his clothes nearly worn through—and, like the bare winter trees, he seemed unable to protect himself from the assault of the cold. I do not know exactly what his age was, but one could tell at a glance that he had grown old well before his years. On some days, while teaching me, he would seem to lose his words entirely, falling into embarrassed silence. His entire family regarded him as afflicted with an obsession. A single idea had taken hold of him. He maintained that in every age, the same idea appears simultaneously in human societies of different countries; the form that idea takes will naturally vary according to the level of civilisation, but the underlying current remains one and the same. It is not that this

common sentiment spreads merely through mutual observation—for even where there is no possibility of observation, the same thing occurs nonetheless. To prove this theory, he did nothing but collect facts and write. Meanwhile, there was no food in his house, no clothing on his back; his own daughters showed not the slightest respect for his theory, and, quite naturally, they were forever scolding him for this madness. On certain days one could tell from his face that he had come upon some good piece of evidence, that his writing had progressed considerably. On such a day I would raise the subject and add fuel to his enthusiasm; but on other days he would arrive deeply despondent—as though the burden he had taken up could no longer be borne. On such a day, obstacles beset every step of the lesson; his eyes would stray to some empty space, and his mind could not by any means be dragged into the elementary Latin grammar. To see this man, bowed beneath the weight of his obsession and the debt of his unfinished work, starved and afflicted, filled me with a great sorrow. Though I understood quite well that his teaching was doing almost nothing to advance my studies, I could not bring myself, by any means, to dismiss him. For whatever days I remained in that lodging, this pretence of studying Latin continued in just this fashion. When I came to settle his fee at my departure, he said to me in a plaintive voice, "I have done nothing but waste your time; I have accomplished no real work at all, so I cannot accept payment from you." I persuaded him, with great difficulty, to accept the fee. Though my Latin tutor never presented me with proof of his theory, I have never to this day disbelieved his words. I still hold to this belief—that there exists an unbroken, profound connection between the minds of all men; that at whatever point some force acts upon one, it is secretly transmitted elsewhere.

From here, the esteemed Palit took me to lodge in the house of a teacher named Barker, who prepared students at home for examinations. In this household, aside from his good-natured wife, there was scarcely a single pleasant thing to be found. I can well understand why such a teacher would attract students, since the poor pupils have no opportunity to exercise their own preferences—but that even such a man should find a wife willing to marry him is something that pains the heart to contemplate. Mrs. Barker's one consolation was a dog—but whenever Mr. Barker wished to punish his wife, it was upon this dog that he inflicted the pain. And so,

through this dog as intermediary, Mrs. Barker had managed to extend the field of her own suffering a little further still.

It was at this time that my sister-in-law summoned me from Torquay in Devonshire, and I hastened there with delight. There, amid mountains, sea, flower-strewn meadows, and the shade of pine woods, I passed—together with my two playful young companions—days of such happiness that I cannot describe them. With my eyes ever enraptured, my mind consecrated in joy, and my leisure hours, laden with unbroken pleasure, sailing daily across the still, blue sky-ocean of infinity—even then, from time to time, I felt a pang of self-reproach at the thought of why no urge to write poetry was stirring within me. And so one day, notebook in hand, umbrella overhead, I went down to the shore of the blue sea at low tide to perform my duty as a poet. I had chosen the spot with care—for it was neither rhyme nor sentiment in itself. A towering crag stood poised, as if eternally alert, leaning out over the sea into empty space; before it, the tranquil blue expanse, fringed with foam, cradled the sky above in its rocking swell, sleeping smilingly to the murmur of the waves; behind, a row of pines cast their shade, scattered like the loosened, careless folds of a forest goddess's garment. Seated upon that rocky throne, I wrote a poem called Manglabati. Had I then and there consigned it to the sea's waters, I might today sit and imagine that it had turned out rather well. But that path is now closed. Unfortunately, it still stands as bodily witness to itself. Though it has been banished from my collected works, should one issue a subpoena, its whereabouts would not be difficult to trace.

But the duty's messenger had not lost patience. Again the summons came—and again I returned to London. This time I found shelter in the household of a respectable gentleman, a Dr. Scott. One evening I arrived at their home carrying my box and trunk. In the house were only the physician himself, his wife, and their eldest daughter. The two younger daughters, overwhelmed by anxious dread at the impending arrival of an Indian guest, had fled to some relative's house. I suppose that when they received word that no grave calamity was likely to result from my presence, they returned.

Within a remarkably short time I became like one of the household. Mrs. Scott treated me with all the affection due to her own son. Her daughters attended to me with such heartfelt care as is rarely to be found even among one's own kinsfolk.

Living in this family, I noticed one particular thing: human nature is everywhere the same. We are accustomed to believe that devotion to one's husband is a special characteristic of our country, unknown in Europe. But I saw no particular difference between Mrs. Scott and the devoted housewives of our own land. Her whole heart was engrossed in her husband's service. In a middle-class household, unburdened by the excess of servants, nearly every task must be done with one's own hands—and so every small task of her husband's, Mrs. Scott performed herself. In the evening, before her husband returned home from work, she would, by the fireside, arrange with her own hands his armchair and his woollen slippers. Whatever pleased or displeased Dr. Scott, whatever manner of conduct he found agreeable or disagreeable—his wife never forgot such things even for a moment. In the morning, with only a single maidservant to help, she herself would scrub and polish, from the upper floor down to the kitchen, the staircase and the brass fittings on the doors until they gleamed—and after this came, of course, the various duties of social life besides. Having completed all the domestic tasks, she would join fully in our reading and music in the evening; and even the gathering together of pleasant pastimes during leisure hours was counted among a housewife's duties.

One evening, with the girls present, we played at table-turning. Several of us together would place our hands upon a small table, and the table would go dancing about the room like a mad thing. Eventually it reached such a point that whatever we touched would begin to move. Mrs. Scott did not much care for this. She would knit her brow gravely and shake her head from time to time, saying, "I don't think this is quite right." Yet she never forcibly stopped this childish game of ours; she tolerated the impropriety. One day, when I took Dr. Scott's tall hat and, placing my hand upon it, was about to make it move, she rushed forward in great agitation and cried, "No, no—that hat you cannot make move!" That even for a moment, some diabolical influence might touch her husband's hat—this she could not endure.

In all of this I could discern one thing—her devotion to her husband. Recalling that sweet, self-effacing humility of hers, I understand that the natural, ultimate culmination of a woman's love is devotion. Where their love encounters no obstacle in its natural unfolding, there it comes of itself to resemble worship. Where the arrangements for sensual pleasure are abundant, where amusement and indulgence fill day and night alike, there this love becomes distorted; there the true nature of womanhood finds no complete fulfilment of its joy.

A few months passed in this manner. The time came for my brother and sister-in-law to return home. My father wrote instructing that I too should return with them. I was delighted at this proposal. The light of my homeland, the sky of my homeland, was calling to me from within. At the time of parting, Mrs. Scott took both my hands and said, weeping, "If you had to leave like this in the end, why did you ever come here for so short a time?"—This household in London no longer exists—some members of this doctor's family have passed to the other world, others have scattered I know not where, and I have no news of any of them—yet that household remains forever enshrined within my heart.

Once, in winter, as I was walking through the streets of Tunbridge Wells, I saw a man standing at the roadside; through the holes in his tattered shoes his bare feet were visible, he wore no socks, and part of his chest showed uncovered. Since begging was forbidden, he said nothing to me, only glanced at my face for a fleeting moment. I gave him a coin that far exceeded anything he could have expected. When I had walked some distance further, he came running up hastily and said, "Sir, you have given me a gold sovereign by mistake"—and he attempted to return the coin to me. This incident might perhaps not have remained in my memory, had another, similar incident not occurred as well. I believe it was upon my very first arrival at Turk railway station that a porter took my luggage and put it into a hired carriage. Opening my purse, I found nothing of the penny variety, only a half-crown—this I gave him, and the carriage drove off. A few moments later I saw that same porter running behind the carriage, calling to the coachman to stop. I thought to myself that, having identified me as an ignorant foreigner, he was coming to

demand more still. When the carriage stopped, he said to me, "You probably meant to give me a penny, and gave me a half-crown by mistake."

I cannot say that no one ever cheated me during all my time in England—but this is not something worth dwelling upon, and to make much of it would be to do an injustice. This thought has struck me forcibly: it is those who do not themselves betray trust who trust others in turn. We were complete strangers, foreigners; we could have slipped away and vanished whenever we pleased—and yet, in all our dealings in shops and markets there, no one ever suspected us of anything.

As long as I remained in England, from beginning to end, a certain farce remained entangled with my sojourn abroad. I had made the acquaintance of the widow of a certain high-ranking English official who had served in India. She was fond of me and called me affectionately by the pet name Rubi. On the occasion of her husband's death, an Indian friend of hers had composed, in English, an elegiac song in his memory. I would rather not comment much upon the skill of its language or the poetic power it displayed. To my great misfortune, there was some indication that this poem was meant to be sung to the raga Behag. One day she caught hold of me and said, "Sing this song for me in the Behag raga." Being altogether too obliging by nature, I complied with her request. How absurd the combination of that strange poem with the Behag melody turned out to be, there was no second person present who could have understood, save myself. The lady, hearing her husband's dirge sung in an Indian melody, was delighted beyond measure. I supposed the matter had ended there—but it had not.

I met that widowed lady frequently thereafter at various dinner parties. When, after dinner, the invited guests—ladies and gentlemen together—had all assembled in the drawing room, she would entreat me to sing that Behag song once more. The others, imagining they were about to hear some wondrous specimen of Indian music, would all join in her entreaty most earnestly; the printed sheet would emerge from the lady's pocket—and the tips of my ears would flush crimson. With a bowed head and mortified voice I would begin to sing—knowing full well that the

result of this dirge would prove far more lamentable for myself than for anyone else present. At the song's end I would hear, amid stifled laughter, "Thank you very much. How interesting!"—and even in the cold of winter my body would break into a sweat. That this gentleman's death should turn out to be so great a calamity for me was something neither he at his birth, nor I at his death, could ever have foreseen.

Afterward, when I went to live in Dr. Scott's household and began attending London University, my meetings with this lady ceased for some time. She lived some distance outside London. She would write to me repeatedly, urging me to visit her at her home. For fear of the dirge, I could by no means bring myself to consent. At last, one day, I received a telegram from her, most earnestly pleading. I received this telegram just as I was on my way to college. By this time the date of my return to Calcutta was also approaching. I decided that before leaving this place, I would fulfil the widow's request at last.

I went straight from college to the station without returning home first. That day the weather was most inclement—bitterly cold, snow falling, the sky shrouded in fog. Since the station to which I was bound was the final terminus of that line, I sat down with complete confidence, deeming it unnecessary to inquire at which stop I ought to alight.

I noticed that all the stations were coming up on the right-hand side. So I sat close to the window on the right and began reading a book by the light of the carriage lamp. It grew dark early that evening; nothing could be seen outside. The few passengers who had boarded from London got off, one by one, at their respective destinations.

The train passed the station just before my destination. At one point it stopped somewhere. Putting my head out of the window, I saw only darkness—no people, no lights, no platform, nothing whatsoever. Those who remain inside a system are

themselves generally deprived of true knowledge of it—there is no way for a railway passenger to know why a train stops in some unlikely place at some odd hour, and so I returned my attention to my book. After a while the train began moving backward—I resolved that it was pointless trying to understand the ways of a railway train. But when I saw that the train had come to a stop at the very station I thought I had already passed, remaining indifferent became difficult for me. I asked a man at the station when the train for such-and-such a station would be available. He said, this very train had just arrived from there. Alarmed, I asked where it was headed. He said, London. I understood then that this was a shuttle train, going back and forth. In great agitation I suddenly got off right there. I asked when the northbound train would be available. He said, not tonight. I asked if there was an inn anywhere nearby. He said, not within five miles.

I had eaten breakfast at ten in the morning and set out; since then I had not so much as touched water. But when no second course remains open except abstinence, then abstinence is by far the simplest. Buttoning my heavy overcoat right up to the neck, I sat down on a bench beneath the station's lamppost and began reading. The book was Spencer's *Study of Sociology*, then only just published. When there is no alternative, I consoled myself, one will never again find such a perfect opportunity to read a book of this kind with proper attention.

After a while a porter came and told me that there was a special train that night, which would arrive within half an hour. Hearing this filled me with such a rush of relief that afterward it became impossible for me to give my attention to Spencer's *Study of Sociology* at all.

I was supposed to arrive at seven, but I did not reach my destination until half-past nine. My hostess exclaimed, "Good heavens, Rubi, whatever has happened!" I did not, I confess, relate my astonishing journey with any particular pride.

By then the other guests had already finished dinner. I had assumed that since my failing had not been intentional, I would not have to suffer any severe penalty—especially since the one dispensing judgment was a woman. But the widow of the high-ranking Indian civil servant said to me, "Come, Rubi, won't you have a cup of tea?"

I never drink tea, but thinking that a cup might do something toward extinguishing the fire in my belly, I gulped down that strong tea along with a couple of round biscuits. Entering the drawing room, I found a gathering of several elderly ladies assembled. Among them was a beautiful young lady, an American, who was celebrating, prior to her marriage, the courtship stage with the hostess's young nephew. The lady of the house declared, "Now then, let us begin the dancing." I had no need whatsoever for dancing, nor was the state of my body or mind at all suited to it. But those who are excessively kind-hearted in this world manage to accomplish the impossible. And so, although this dance was arranged expressly for that young couple, after ten hours of fasting and a mere two biscuits, I found myself dancing with elderly ladies well past their prime.

Even here the limit of my sorrows had not been reached. My hostess asked me, "Rubi, where will you spend the night tonight?" I was entirely unprepared for this question. As I stood stupefied, staring at her face, she said, "The inn here closes at midnight, so you had better go there straightaway without further delay." There was no lack whatsoever of courtesy—I did not even have to find the inn myself. A servant, carrying a lantern, escorted me there.

I thought to myself, perhaps a blessing had come in disguise—perhaps there would be arrangements for a meal here. I asked whether I might have something to eat, meat or vegetarian, fresh or stale, anything at all. They said, drink as much as you like, but no food. I then thought that the goddess of sleep, being tender of heart, would surely grant oblivion in place of food. But even within her boundless embrace, she gave me no place that night. The room, with its stone floor, was

bitterly cold; a battered old bedstead and a rickety washstand comprised the entire furnishing.

In the morning the Anglo-Indian widow sent word inviting me to breakfast. What the English by custom call "cold meat" was the fare provided—that is, the remains of the previous night's feast, eaten cold this morning. Had even some small portion of this been served warm or lukewarm the night before, no great harm would have befallen anyone in this world—yet my dance had proved as mournful an affair as the death-throes of a fish flung upon a basket.

After breakfast, my hostess said, "The one for whom I summoned you to sing is unwell, bedridden; you must stand outside her bedroom door and sing to her there." I was made to stand upon the staircase. Pointing toward the closed door, the lady of the house said, "She is in that room." Standing before that unseen mystery, I sang the song of mourning in the Behag raga—what became of the patient's condition afterward, I never learned, whether by word of mouth or through any newspaper.

Returning to London, I took to my bed for two or three days, doing penance for my unbridled good nature. The doctor's daughters said, "For heaven's sake, do not take this dinner-party affair as typical of our country's hospitality. This is the fruit of your India's salt."

LOKEN PALIT

While I was studying in the English Literature class at University College in England, Loken Palit was my close companion there. He was about four years younger than me. At the age I am writing these memoirs, a difference of four years would hardly seem worth noticing—but at seventeen, against thirteen, the gap is so great that it becomes difficult to overlook it in forming a friendship. It is precisely because age carries no dignity of its own that a boy tries to preserve his sense of self-importance regarding it. But with this particular boy I felt no such hesitation whatsoever. The sole reason was that I could never bring myself to think of Loken as in any way inferior in intellect.

In the library of University College, students, both male and female, would sit reading; it was there that the two of us had our little corner for conversation. Had we conducted this business quietly, no one would have had any cause for complaint—but my friend's youthful mind was so perpetually swollen with an abundance of mirth that the slightest jostle would set it bubbling forth with a burst of sound. In every country one finds an excessive degree of earnestness among female students regarding their studies. How many silent reproachful glances from the blue eyes of our fellow lady-students, engrossed in their reading nearby, fell in vain upon our loud laughter and chatter—recalling this fills me today with a measure of shame and remorse. But in those days I had not the slightest sympathy for the agonies of studious application. Never once did I suffer from a headache, and by the grace of Providence, the burden of academic study never gave me the least trouble.

It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that our laughter and chatter went on almost without interruption in that library-temple. We did discuss literature too. In those discussions, I could never think of my boy-friend as immature. Though he had read far less Bengali than I had, he was easily able to make up that deficiency through sheer force of thought.

Among our other discussions was one concerning the theory of Bengali orthography. It had its origin thus: A daughter of Dr. Scott's household had expressed enthusiasm to learn Bengali from me. While teaching her the Bengali alphabet, I had proudly declared that in our language there existed a certain logic to spelling—that its rule was not simply to break the rule at every turn. I informed her that the anarchy of English spelling rules was utterly ridiculous, and that it was made so lamentable only because we were forced to memorise it by rote for our examinations. But my pride did not last long. I discovered that Bengali spelling too observed no fixed rule—that it broke rules at every turn, a fact I had simply never noticed before, out of sheer habit, all these years. I then set about trying to discover a rule underlying this apparent lawlessness. I would do this work sitting in the library of University College. The help Loken gave me in this matter left me quite astonished.

Some years later, when Loken entered the Civil Service and returned to India, the discussion that had begun amid laughter and mirth in that college library gradually broadened and continued to flow onward. Loken's intense delight in literature drove the momentum of my writing forward like a following wind filling a sail. In the full bloom of my youth, when, as editor of *Sadhana*, I drove my team of prose and verse forward at an unflagging pace, Loken's boundless enthusiasm never once let my energy flag. How many diaries of that period's *Panchabhoot*, and how many poems written in the countryside, were composed sitting in his Bengali-style room! Our sessions of poetry discussion and music would sometimes begin under the evening star and continue, unbroken, until they ended with the morning breeze, the lamp of night going out along with the fading of the last stars. In the lotus-grove of Saraswati, the fragrance of the flower of friendship is sweeter far than the pollen of wisdom itself. In this grove, one did not perhaps gain much acquaintance with golden pollen, but I have no cause to complain regarding the sweet fragrance of affection.

BHAGNAHRIDAY

Another poem too had its seed sown in England. I completed it partly on the return voyage, partly after coming back home. It was published under the title Bhagnahriday (The Broken Heart), and at the time I thought the writing had turned out extremely well. Such a conviction is not unusual on the part of an author. But even the readers of that day did not receive this work with complete indifference. I recall that, some time after this piece appeared, the minister of the late Maharaja Bir Chandra Manikya of Tripura came to Calcutta to call upon me. The poem had pleased the Maharaja, and he entertained high hopes for the poet's success in his literary endeavours; it was solely to convey this message that he had sent his minister to me.

Regarding this poetry written at the age of eighteen, I quote here from a letter I wrote at the age of thirty—

"When I began writing Bhagnahriday, I was eighteen years old. Neither childhood nor youth. It is an age poised at such a junction from which one has no convenient access to the clear light of truth. One gets only the faintest hint, and just a little shadow besides. At this time, imagination, like the shadows of evening, becomes extremely elongated and indistinct. The real world becomes a fantastical world. The amusing thing is that it was not only I who was eighteen then—everyone around me seemed to be eighteen as well. All of us together inhabited a substanceless, baseless realm of imagination. The intense joys and sorrows of that imaginary realm were like the joys and sorrows of a dream. That is to say, there was no true, weighable substance to them—only the mind itself, playing with itself, working itself up into all manner of fanciful shapes."

From about fifteen or sixteen up to twenty-two or twenty-three—this stretch of years was a period of considerable disorder. In that geological age when the division of land and water upon the earth had not yet been properly settled, upon

that first layer of primordial mud, enormous and grotesquely-formed amphibious creatures would wander through the branchless, primeval forests of that early time. In the twilight realm of an immature mind, the emotions likewise assumed such disproportionate, fantastic shapes, wandering through a nameless, pathless, endless forest of shadow. They know not even themselves, nor do they recognise any external object of their aim. Knowing nothing of themselves, they continually imitate something else at every step. They try to compensate, through excess, for the absence of any real truth. In that unfulfilled state of life, when the innate powers are jostling one another trying to break free, when truth has not yet come within their sight or grasp, it is through exaggeration alone that the self tries to proclaim itself. When a child's teeth are struggling to emerge, those unerupted teeth bring on a feverish heat within the body. That excitement serves no purpose whatsoever until the teeth actually break through and help to draw in nourishment from without. The same condition afflicts the emotions of the mind. Until they establish their own true relation with the outer world, they torment the mind like an affliction.

The lesson I have drawn from that early experience can be found written in every book of moral philosophy—but that is no reason to dismiss it as unworthy of attention. Whatever our inclinations keep hidden entirely within themselves, never allowing complete outward expression, is precisely what poisons life. Self-interest never permits our impulses to reach their ultimate fulfilment—it will not let go of them completely—and this is why every kind of excessive violence is the ally of dishonest self-serving. When these impulses attain complete liberation in works of benevolence, that very moment their morbidity vanishes—that very moment they become natural. The true fulfilment of our impulses lies precisely there—and there too lies the path to joy.

I have spoken of this immaturity of mind, and joined to it was the teaching and example of that particular era. Whether the force of that era has entirely passed even now, I cannot say with certainty. Looking back at that time of which I speak, it occurs to me that from English literature we received a far greater dose of intoxicant than of actual nourishment. In those days our literary deities were

Shakespeare, Milton, and Byron. What struck us most forcefully in their writing was the sheer intensity of emotional passion. This intensity of feeling remains suppressed in the ordinary conduct of English life, and yet in their literature its dominance seems, if anything, even greater in proportion. To carry an emotional passion to its utter extreme and bring it to some catastrophic conclusion—this is a particular characteristic of this literature. Indeed, we had come to accept that very untamed fervour as the essence of English literature. When our literary mentor of boyhood, the esteemed Akshay Chowdhury, would recite English poetry in a state of rapture, there was, in that very manner of recitation, a fierce, intoxicating quality. The love-madness of Romeo and Juliet, the tempestuous outburst of Lear's helpless anguish, the conflagration of jealousy consuming Othello—in all of these there is a certain overwhelming excess which stirred the excitement in their minds.

Our society, our little spheres of work and duty, were enclosed within such utterly monotonous walls that no storm of passion could find entry there at all—everything was, so far as possible, cool and quiet; and it was for this reason that the force and violence of this emotional passion in English literature struck us with a vital shock which our hearts naturally craved. The pleasure that beauty in literary art gives us is not this pleasure—this is the pleasure of stirring up a great commotion within extreme stillness. Even if all the mud at the bottom rises to the surface in the process, that too, one must confess, was acceptable to us.

When once, in Europe, the days of excessive restraint and oppression of human emotional impulse had passed, and, as a violent reaction against it, the age of the Renaissance dawned, the dramatic literature of Shakespeare's contemporary age was precisely the dance of celebration for that revolution. In this literature, the judgment of good and evil, of beauty and ugliness, was not the primary concern—man sought to see his own emotional nature freed from every restraint of its inner chambers, to witness, as it were, the ultimate embodiment of its unbridled power. It is for this very reason that one finds in this literature such extraordinary intensity, abundance, and lack of restraint. That very tumultuous, festive rhythm of European society, entering into our own excessively decorous society, suddenly shook us from sleep and set us into restless motion. Where the heart lies perpetually

smothered beneath the weight of custom, never given the opportunity to reveal its full self, there the unrestrained, spontaneous drama of a free and living heart, played out in that blazing light, took us utterly by surprise.

On another occasion, when English literature—once the stagnant, torpid age of Pope had ended—entered the turbulent surge of the era of the French Revolution, Byron was the poet of that time. In his poetry too, that same untamed intensity of emotional passion stirred our decorous society's veiled heart—our timid bride—into restlessness.

And so that restless current of English literary discussion manifested itself with particular force among the educated youth of our country. The waves of that agitation struck us from every direction throughout our boyhood. That first awakening was not a time of restraint, but a time of excitement.

And yet there was a great difference between our situation and that of Europe. This turbulence of the European mind, this rebellion against the bondage of rule, arose there from its own history and was reflected in its literature. There was a correspondence between its inner and outer reality. There, a storm had truly arisen, and so the roar of that storm was truly heard. The little breath of wind that stirred in our society did not rise to the pitch of that thunderous roar—but our minds were not satisfied with that little breath either, and so, in trying to imitate the call of the storm, we forced ourselves toward exaggeration. Even now, I do not think that habit has entirely worn off. The chief reason it will not easily disappear is that restraint in literary art has not yet come to English literature itself; even now, the tendency to say too much, and to express things with excessive intensity, prevails there universally. Emotional passion is merely one instrument of literature, not its goal—the true goal of literature is the beauty of complete fulfilment, and hence restraint and simplicity—this truth has not yet been fully acknowledged in English literature.

Our minds, from childhood to the grave, have been shaped by this English literature alone. Those literatures of Europe, ancient and modern, whose literary dignity has been perfected through the discipline of restraint, have not formed part of our education—and this, I think, is why we have not yet properly grasped the true method and purpose of literary composition.

The man who made the fierce excitement of English literary education vivid and real for us in those days was himself a worshipper of the heart above all else. It was not that truth needed to be comprehended in its entirety—rather, his view seemed to be that merely to feel it with the heart was enough to fulfil its purpose. He had not the slightest conviction regarding religion from the standpoint of reason, and yet, when singing songs on the subject of the goddess Shyama, tears would stream from his eyes. In such matters, no real substance was necessary for him—whatever imagination could stir the emotions, that alone he wished to treat as though it were truth. Because the need for emotional feeling was so much more powerful than the need for perceiving truth, he had no hesitation in accepting whatever satisfied that need, however crude it might be.

The European literature of that age was dominated chiefly by the influence of atheism. It was the age of Bentham, Mill, and Comte. Using their very arguments, our young men of that time engaged in debate. In Europe, this age of Mill represented a natural stage in the course of history. In order to clear away the accumulated debris of the European mind, this destructive and cleansing force, as an effort of nature itself, had risen up for a time with great vigour. But in our country, this was something we had merely picked up secondhand. We did not use it as a genuine instrument of truth-seeking. We used it purely as an excitement for intellectual rebellion. Atheism was a kind of intoxication for us. And so, in those days, we saw two kinds of people. One group would argue at every opportunity, determined to tear apart with the weapon of logic any belief in the existence of God. Just as a hunter delights in bird-shooting, and the moment he spies a living creature perched upon a tree or branch, his hand itches to bring it down and finish it off—so too, wherever these men spotted some innocent belief resting peacefully, unsuspecting of any danger, their excitement to hunt it down and destroy it was

aroused at once. For a brief period we had a tutor who took this very pleasure in the sport. I was then quite a young boy, but even I was not spared by him. And yet his own learning was rather modest—it was not even that he had arrived at his position through diligent study and comparison of all viewpoints on the subject of truth; he had simply gathered his arguments secondhand from another man's mouth. I fought against him with all my might, but since I was an utterly unequal opponent, I often suffered great distress on his account. Some days I grew so angry that I felt like weeping.

The other group were those who did not believe in religion, but rather indulged in it as a form of enjoyment. For this reason, they loved to lose themselves, taking refuge as in a sensuous pleasure, in all the artifice, all the profusion of resonant, fragrant, colourful, savoury contrivance available on the pretext of religion; devotion itself was their indulgence. In neither of these two camps was scepticism or atheism the fruit of genuine austere search for truth—it was chiefly the excitement of passion.

Although this rebellion against religion caused me distress, it would not be true to say that it never took hold of me at all. In the early days of youth, this spirit of rebellion, joined with the arrogance of intellect, found a place in my mind as well. I had no connection whatsoever with the religious practice that existed in our family—I never accepted it for myself. I merely worked the bellows in the furnace of my own emotional passions, kindling a great fire. It was fire-worship pure and simple; it was merely the pouring of oblations to make the flame grow higher; it had no other purpose. And because it had no purpose, it had no measure either—it could be inflated as much as one pleased, endlessly.

Just as with religion, so too with one's own emotional passions—there was no need whatsoever for any truth; excitement alone sufficed. I recall a verse by a poet of that time—

My heart, my very own heart,
I have sold it to no one else,
Broken or whole, be it what it may,
My heart remains my own.

From the standpoint of truth, the heart suffers no impediment whatsoever; for it, to be shattered or to meet with any other kind of catastrophe is entirely unnecessary; the truth of sorrow and desolation holds no attraction—but merely its tumult and clamour became an object of enjoyment—and it was for this reason that poetry made such commotion its stock in trade—this was, in effect, straining out the flavour of divine worship while discarding the deity altogether. Even today, this malady has not vanished from our country. That is why, even now, wherever we cannot establish religion upon a foundation of genuine truth, we support it instead through sentimentality, classifying it under the heading of art. That is why, in large measure, our love of country is not the genuine service of our country, but rather the cultivation of a certain sentiment concerning the country within the heart.

ENGLISH MUSIC

While staying in Brighton, I once went to hear a celebrated songstress perform at the local concert hall. I no longer recall her name—it may have been Madame Nilsson or Madame Albani. Never before had I witnessed such astonishing power in a human voice. Even our own great masters of song back home could not approach such a feat—for whatever high notes or difficult passages did not come easily to their throats, they felt no shame whatsoever in producing however they could. This is because, among audiences in our country, those with true musical discernment take delight in erecting the song's edifice themselves, within their own minds, through the sheer force of their own understanding; for this reason, they hold in some disdain the polished, effortless grace of a sweet-voiced singer's rendering. It is as though the outer roughness, and even a certain measure of incompleteness, allow the true inner essence of the thing to reveal itself unveiled. This is rather like the outward poverty of Maheshwar—wherein his true grandeur shows itself all the more naked and unadorned. In Europe, this attitude is entirely absent. There, the outward apparatus must be flawless in every particular—any flaw in the performance there, and one loses all standing before one's fellow men. We, sitting in our musical gatherings, think nothing of spending half an hour tuning the tanpura and pounding away at the tabla with hammer-blows of adjustment. But in Europe all such preparatory labour is concealed behind the scenes—whatever appears before the public there must be utterly complete. For this reason, the singer's voice there cannot afford even the faintest trace of weakness anywhere. In our country, the practice of singing itself is paramount—all our difficulty lies precisely in that practice. In Europe, the training of the voice is paramount—through that trained voice, they accomplish the impossible. In our country, the true listener is satisfied merely by hearing the song; in Europe, the listeners listen to the singing itself. This is precisely what I observed that day in Brighton—that singer's performance was strange, astonishing indeed. It seemed to me as though a circus horse were being driven round and round within her throat. Nowhere within that vocal passage did the play of melody meet with the slightest obstruction. Yet however much wonder I might feel—I know not why—that song did not please me in the least that day. In particular, there were passages here and there imitating birdcalls, which struck me as exceedingly comical. On the whole, I

could only feel that the very nature of the human voice was somehow being transgressed. Afterward, listening to the male singers brought me a sense of relief—especially the tenor voice, which is by no means the disembodied lament of some lost, wandering wind, but carries within it the very flesh and blood of the human throat. After this, as I listened to more music, and learned more, I gradually began to taste the essence of European music. But to this very day, I feel that the chamber wherein European music dwells and the chamber of our own music are somehow distinct—that they do not enter through one and the same door into the same inner sanctum of the heart. European music seems intricately entangled with the actual practical life of man. Thus I observe that in Europe, melody may be composed drawing upon every sort of incident and description; whereas if we were to attempt anything of that kind with our own native melodies, it would appear grotesque, devoid of true feeling. Our music seems to transcend the humdrum boundary of everyday life; hence it possesses such deep compassion and renunciation—it seems dedicated to revealing a form of some inward and ineffable mystery of universal nature and the human heart; that realm of mystery is vast, secluded, solitary, and profound—wherein are built the pleasure-bowers of the hedonist and the hermitages of the devotee, but wherein there exists no proper arrangement whatsoever for the man of worldly duty caught up in action.

I cannot claim to have penetrated to the very heart of European music. But whatever degree of access I gained from the outside allowed European music to draw my heart powerfully in one particular direction. It seemed to me that this music was Romantic. It is difficult to say precisely, through analysis, what exactly is meant by "Romantic." But, speaking roughly, one aspect of the Romantic is the aspect of variety, the aspect of abundance, the aspect of the wave-play of the ocean of life, the aspect of the clash of light and shadow upon ceaseless restless motion; and there is another aspect too, which is expansiveness, which is the unblinking stillness of the sky's blue depths, which is the silent hint of infinity along the far horizon-line. Be that as it may, though the point may not be entirely clear, whenever I have tasted the essence of European music, I have repeatedly said to myself within my mind: this is Romantic. It expresses itself by translating the variegated richness of human life into musical melody. It is not that our music entirely lacks this endeavour here and there, but that endeavour has never become

powerful or successful. Our music has given voice to India's star-studded night skies and to the newly-awakened crimson glow of dawn; our music is the word-forgetting bewilderment of the universal pain of separation in the heavy monsoon rains, and of the deep, forest-spreading madness of the new spring, stretched out to the very horizon.

VALMIKI-PRATIBHA

In our house there was a volume of Moore's Irish Melodies, illustrated page by page with delicately coloured pictures. I had often heard those poems recited with rapt devotion by Akshay Babu. Those poems, entwined with their pictures, created in my mind a certain ancient enchanted vision of Ireland. At that time I had not yet heard the melodies of these poems—they existed only in my imagination. A harp was drawn in the pictures, and the music of that harp played within my mind. It had been my great desire to hear these Irish Melodies set to their proper tunes, to learn them, and then, having learned them, to sing them for Akshay Babu. By ill fortune, some of life's wishes are fulfilled—and being fulfilled, thereby accomplish their own self-destruction. Having gone to England, I heard and learned a fair number of these melodies—but the desire to master every single song from beginning to end no longer remained. Many of the tunes were sweet and plaintive and simple, yet still they did not join, in the manner I had imagined, the silent harp of Ireland's ancient assembly of bards.

Returning home, I sang these and various other English songs to my family circle. Everyone declared that Robi's voice had changed so strangely—somehow it had become foreign-sounding, oddly amusing. Some even said that the very tone of my speaking voice had altered somewhat.

It was amid this practice of native and foreign melodies that Valmiki-Pratibha came into being. Most of its melodies are indigenous; but in this musical drama they have been drawn out of their customary drawing-room dignity and pressed into other service—that whose profession is to soar has been made to run upon the ground. Those who have witnessed the performance of this musical drama will, I hope, all agree that harnessing music to such dramatic purpose has proved neither incongruous nor futile. This is precisely the distinguishing feature of Valmiki-Pratibha. The joy of thus liberating music from its bonds and employing it, unabashedly, in every conceivable manner, took particular hold of my mind. Many of the songs in Valmiki-Pratibha are adaptations of drawing-room songs, many are

set to tunes composed by Jyotidada for other lyrics, and a handful of songs are taken from English melodies. The languid melodies of our drawing-room songs can readily be employed for such dramatic purposes—and in this drama, this has been done in many places. Among the English melodies, two have been set to a robbers' drinking-song, and one Irish melody has been set to the forest-goddess's lament. In truth, Valmiki-Pratibha is not a book meant to be read—it is a novel experiment in music; without hearing it performed, one cannot possibly appreciate its flavour at all. What in European parlance is called an "opera," Valmiki-Pratibha is not—it is a play set to music; that is to say, music does not gain primary dominance within it—rather, its dramatic subject is set to melody and enacted; the pure sweetness of independent music exists in it only in very few places.

Even before my departure for England, our house used to hold gatherings of literary men called Bidwajjana-Samagam (Assembly of the Learned). At these gatherings there would be arrangements for song, recitation of poetry, and refreshment. After I returned from England, this assembly was convened once more—this was the last time. It was on the occasion of this very gathering that Valmiki-Pratibha was composed. I played the part of Valmiki, and my niece Pratibha played Saraswati—this bit of history remains preserved within the very name Valmiki-Pratibha.

I once read in an essay by Herbert Spencer that wherever, in ordinary speech, there occurs even a slight stirring of emotional feeling, some strain of melody spontaneously attaches itself. Indeed, we do not express anger, sorrow, joy, or wonder through words alone—melody accompanies the words. It is by perfecting this very melody that naturally accompanies ordinary speech that man arrived at music. This idea of Spencer's appealed to me. I thought—why should it not be possible, following this theory, to express various emotions through melody from beginning to end, weaving them through the song, and thus enact a performance. In our country, storytelling recitation possesses this endeavour to some degree; in it, the words are occasionally supported by faint suggestions of melody, and yet this does not amount to proper, disciplined music governed by rhythm and measure. Just as the amitrakshar (blank verse) meter is a form of meter, so this too is of that same kind as a song—it has no strict binding of rhythmic beat, only a

suggestion of tempo—its sole purpose being to bring out fully the emotional feeling contained within the words, not to render any particular raga or tala in its pure form. In Valmiki-Pratibha, the discipline of song has not been entirely dissolved, yet in following the emotion, the rhythmic structure has had to be diminished. Since the dramatic performance itself was paramount, this deviation from strict rhythm caused the listeners no distress.

Having found this new approach to music in Valmiki-Pratibha congenial, I wrote another musical drama of this same genre. Its name was Kal-Mrigaya (The Fatal Hunt), its dramatic subject being the killing of the blind sage's son by Dasharatha. This was performed with a stage erected on the roof of the third floor—the audience was deeply moved by its pathos. Later, since much of this musical drama was merged into Valmiki-Pratibha, it was not published within my collected works.

Some considerable time afterward, I wrote yet another musical drama called Mayar Khela (The Play of Illusion), but that belonged to a different genre altogether. In it, drama was not paramount—song was paramount. Just as Valmiki-Pratibha and Kal-Mrigaya were a gathering of drama threaded upon song, Mayar Khela was, likewise, a garland of song threaded upon drama. It did not depend upon the current of plot; emotional feeling was its principal ingredient. Indeed, when I wrote Mayar Khela, my whole mind was consecrated entirely to the essence of music alone.

I never again wrote anything with the same enthusiasm with which I composed Valmiki-Pratibha and Kal-Mrigaya. In these two works is manifested a certain musical excitement of that period of ours. Jyotidada, in those days, was almost daily occupied for the entire day in throwing the classical ragas into the mould of the piano and churning them about however he pleased. In this process, each raga would, moment by moment, reveal some strange new form and shade of feeling. Whenever melodies bound within customary rule and confined to a slow, measured pace were made to run in unconventional, disordered fashion, that very revolution would reveal in their nature ever new and unimaginable powers, forever stirring our minds. It seemed as though the melodies were speaking words of every

kind—we seemed to hear this quite distinctly. Akshay Babu and I would often, in accompaniment to Jyotidada's playing, attempt to fit words to the melody as it went along. It is not that the words that resulted were always fit for reading, but they served as vehicles carrying those melodies.

It was in the exultation of such rule-breaking musical revolution that these two plays were written. This is why they contain the dance of rhythm untethered to strict measure, and no discrimination between English and Bengali. Many of my opinions and modes of composition have often provoked the reading public of Bengal to irritation, but curiously enough, no one expressed any resentment whatsoever regarding the audacity displayed with respect to music in these two musical dramas, and everyone returned home well pleased. Valmiki-Pratibha contains several songs by Akshay Babu, and in two of its songs the language of the esteemed Bihari Chakraborty's Saradamangal has been employed in one or two passages.

I myself took the leading role in the performance of these two musical dramas. From childhood, I had harboured within me a passion for dramatic performance. I firmly believed that I possessed a natural aptitude for this art. This belief of mine was not without foundation, as has since been proven. Before the theatrical stage was revealed to the general public, I had played the role of Alik Babu in Jyotidada's farce Emon Karma Ar Karba Na (I Shall Never Commit Such a Deed Again). That was my first performance. In those days, being young, my throat suffered no fatigue or hindrance in singing; in those days, day after day, hour upon hour at home, the ceaseless dissolving fountain of music showered down its cool spray, scattering the rainbow's colours of melody within the mind; in those days, youth's ever-fresh energy rushed ever onward along the path of new curiosities; in those days, I wished to test and examine everything, never once thinking there was anything I could not accomplish; in those days, I was writing, singing, performing, pouring myself forth abundantly in every direction—it was in exactly this manner that I took my steps at that age of twenty. That day, when he drove all my powers forward with such untamed enthusiasm, it was Jyotidada who was the charioteer. He knew no fear whatsoever. When I was quite a mere boy, he would mount me upon a

horse and gallop off with him at full speed, expressing not the slightest concern that an inexperienced rider might fall. It was in that same boyhood of mine that, one day at Shelidah, word arrived that a tiger had come into the village woods—he took me along on that very hunt: I had no weapon in hand, and even had I possessed one, my own danger from it would have exceeded any danger from the tiger; outside the forest, having removed my shoes, I climbed, somehow, onto a half-cut bamboo stump and sat there behind Jyotidada—had that uncivil beast laid a paw upon me, there was no way I could have insulted it with even one or two blows of my shoe. In this manner, in every direction, inward and outward alike, amid every possibility of danger, he granted me freedom—he paid heed to no rule or regulation whatsoever, and he liberated my entire disposition from all constraint and hesitation.

EVENING SONGS

I have already written of that state in which I remained confined within myself; in my collected works, edited by the esteemed Mohit Babu, the poems of that period have been designated under the name "Hridoy-Aranya" (Forest of the Heart). In Prabhat-Sangeet, in the poem titled "Punarmilan" (Reunion), occur the lines:

Within the heart there lies a vast forest,
In every direction, no shore is found,
Amid it wander the lost of path.
That forest is shrouded in darkness, the tangled branches of trees
With a thousand arms of tenderness
Gather the darkness close to their breast.

The name "Hridoy-Aranya" has been taken from this very poem.

In this way, when I had no connection with life outside myself, when I remained absorbed within my own heart alone, when my imagination wandered through various disguises amid causeless emotion and aimless longing, many poems of that period were excluded from the new collected works—only a few poems published in Sandhya-Sangeet found their place within the "Hridoy-Aranya" section.

At one time Jyotidada and his family had gone travelling to a distant land—the rooms on the third floor stood empty. During that time I would occupy that terrace and those rooms and spend my solitary days there.

While thus dwelling alone in this manner, I know not exactly how, but the constraints within which I had been confined regarding poetic composition simply slipped away. Those poems which my companions loved, and which the mind naturally strove to write in the mould calculated to win their favour—I suppose it was because they went far away that my mind spontaneously gained release from the discipline of all such poems.

I would write poetry upon a slate. This too was probably a sign of a certain liberation. Before that, when I would sit down properly, with due formality, to write poetry in a notebook, there was surely, within that act, something of a proper vow to write real poetry—a certain calculation, in the back of my mind, about accumulating a store of poetic fame, comparing myself with others. But whatever I wrote upon the slate was written purely at whim. A slate, after all, seems to say—what fear have you? Write whatever you please—a single wipe of the hand will erase it all anyway.

But merely by writing one or two poems in this manner, a great surge of joy came into my mind. My whole inner being cried out—I am saved! Whatever I am writing, whatever I am beholding here, is entirely, wholly mine own.

Let no one mistake this for mere boastful pride. In much of my earlier composition there had rather been a kind of vanity—for vanity alone was the ultimate wage of such writing. That satisfaction one feels upon suddenly experiencing certainty regarding one's own standing—that I would not call arrogance. The first joy that parents feel toward their child is not because the child is beautiful, but because the child is truly their own. Along with this, upon recollecting the child's virtues, they may indeed feel pride—but that is quite another matter. In the first joy of this new independence, I abandoned all deference to rhyme and metrical bondage entirely. A river, after all, does not flow straight like a canal—my metre likewise began winding and bending, assuming various forms as it went. Formerly I would have counted this a fault, but now I felt not the slightest hesitation about it. Freedom, in

first proclaiming itself, breaks the existing rule; afterward, it fashions a rule of its own with its own hand—only then does it become truly master of itself.

There was, at that time, only one person to whom I would recite these unruly poems of mine—Akshay Babu. He was astonished and delighted the moment he saw these writings of mine. Having received his approval, my path grew even wider still.

The esteemed Bihari Chakraborty, in his *Bangasundari*, had introduced a metre based on three-beat measures, as in:

One day the young sun
Beheld, in the waters of the celestial river,
A maiden of matchless beauty
Playing among the blue lotus-leaves.

A thing measured in threes is not four-square like a thing measured in twos—it is round like a ball, and hence rolls along with swift momentum—the dance of this swift-moving gait seems to jingle anklet-bells in continuous rapid succession. For a time I used this very metre a great deal. It was as though it did not walk upon two feet at all, but moved rather like riding upon a bicycle. This had become quite a habit of mine. In *Sandhya-Sangeet* I severed this bondage, not deliberately, but quite spontaneously. By then I no longer looked toward any bond whatsoever. There seemed to be no fear or apprehension left in my mind at all. I wrote on and on, without a thought for how anyone might hold me accountable. It was in writing thus, disregarding all previous conventions, that I found such strength, that I made my very first discovery: that which had lain nearest to me all along was the very thing I had been searching for far and wide. It was only because I could not rely upon myself alone that I had failed to possess what was truly mine own. It was as though, waking suddenly from a dream, I saw that no chains had ever been placed

upon my hands. It was for this very reason that I flung my hand about however I pleased, purely in order to express this joy of discovering it unfettered.

Once again, in the history of the writing of my poetry, this period is, for me, more memorable than any other. As poetry, Sandhya-Sangeet may not possess great worth. Its poems are considerably raw. Its rhythm, language, and sentiment have not yet fully taken shape and blossomed forth. Its virtue lies in this: that suddenly, one day, relying wholly upon myself, I wrote whatever I pleased. Therefore that writing itself may lack value—but the joy possesses value.

AN ESSAY CONCERNING SONG

I had begun making preparations in England with the intention of becoming a barrister, when my father summoned me back home. Several friends, distressed that this opportunity for me to gain distinction had been broken off, urged my father to send me back to England once more. On the strength of this urging, I once again set out on a journey to England. Along with me was another relative—but my fortune so thoroughly disallowed my becoming a barrister that I never even reached England at all—for particular reasons I had to disembark at the port of Madras and return to Calcutta. However grave the incident may sound, the reason behind it is nothing of the sort; hearing it, people would laugh, and that laughter would not, sixteen annas' worth, be rightfully mine to bear—for this very reason I shall not elaborate upon it here. Be that as it may, twice I set out on the journey in pursuit of Fortune's favour, and twice I returned having received nothing but a rebuff. I hope the deities of Law will look upon me with kindness for not having further burdened the shelves of the Bar library.

My father was then in Mussoorie in the hills. I went to him in considerable trepidation. He expressed not the slightest displeasure—indeed, it seemed rather that he was pleased. He must certainly have felt that my having returned home had turned out well for me, and that this good fortune had come about entirely through God's blessing.

The evening before my second departure for England, I read a paper at the Medical College Hall, at the invitation of the Bethune Society. This was the first paper I ever read before a public assembly. The presiding chairman was the aged Reverend Krishnamohan Bandyopadhyay. The subject of the paper was music. Setting aside instrumental music, I attempted to explain, regarding vocal music, that the chief purpose of this class of music is precisely to bring out and illuminate the meaning of the song's words through the melody of the song itself. The written portion of my essay was quite brief. In attempting to support my argument through illustration, I sang songs of various kinds in various melodies, covering almost the

entire essay from beginning to end. The abundant praise which the chairman bestowed upon me, exclaiming "Vande Valmiki-kokilam" (I salute the cuckoo Valmiki), I believe was chiefly because my age was then quite young, and his heart had been touched, hearing a boy's throat produce so many varied songs. But I shall confess today that the theory I expounded then, with such competitive confidence, was not entirely true. The lyric art possesses its own particular nature and its own particular function. When a song contains words, it is not proper for the melody, taking advantage of that opportunity, to overrun the words entirely—there, the melody is merely the vehicle of the words themselves. Song has its own inherent glory—why should it become the slave of poetry? Where words end, that is precisely where song begins. Where that which is inexpressible dwells, that is precisely where song's dominion lies. What words cannot say, song alone can say. For this reason, the fewer the intrusions of mere verbal meaning within a song's lyrics, the better. The words of Hindustani songs are generally so utterly insignificant that melody can transcend them entirely and freely proclaim its own appeal. It is precisely where a raga, purely through its notes alone, can awaken our minds in some marvellous, wordless way, that music attains its highest excellence. But in Bengal, for a very long time, the dominance of words has been so overwhelming that pure music here has never been able to secure its own independent right of place. For this reason, in this country, music must live sheltered within its sister art of poetry. From the devotional verses of the Vaishnava poets down to Nidhu Babu's songs, music has remained subordinate to words throughout, striving to develop its own sweetness while remaining subject to them at every turn. But just as, in our country, a wife may exercise authority over her husband precisely by first acknowledging her subordination to him, so too, in this country, song assumes the burden of following words, and thereby overtakes and surpasses them. This truth has repeatedly become apparent to me during the very act of composing songs. Whenever, humming to myself, I would write a line such as, "Keep that secret word, my friend, don't reveal it"—I would find that the melody, in carrying the words away to some particular place, arrived at a point the words themselves could never have reached on foot, walking their own way there. Then it seemed to me that the secret word I was so eagerly striving to hear had somehow merged into the greenness of a row of forest trees, had sunk into the still whiteness of the full-moon night, lay veiled within the bluish far-distance of the horizon's edge—it seemed to be the deeply hidden secret word of the entire

expanse of earth, water, and sky. In very early boyhood I had heard a song, "Who has dressed you as a stranger, Beloved?" That single line of that song had painted such a wondrous picture in my mind that even today that line still hums and echoes within me. One day, enchanted by that very line of that song, I too sat down to write a song. With the melody humming in my mind, I first wrote the line, "I know you, oh I know you, my stranger-love"—had the melody not accompanied it, I cannot say what feeling this song would have conveyed at all. But through the magical power of that melody, a wondrous image of the Stranger-love arose within me. My mind began to say—within this world of ours, some unknown Stranger-love comes and goes; beyond some ocean of mystery, upon its shore, stands her dwelling—her I glimpse, moment by moment, in the dawn of autumn, in the moonlit night of spring—even amid the depths of the heart, now and again, a hint of her presence has been felt; straining my ears toward the sky, I have sometimes even heard her voice. At the door of that universe-enchancing Songstress of the cosmic creation, the melody of my song brought me and made me stand, and I sang:

Having wandered the whole world round,
I have come at last to your country,
I am a guest at your door, O Stranger-love.

Many days after this, one day someone was singing along the road at Bolpur—

The unknown bird within the cage comes and goes at will,
Could I but catch it, I would bind fetters of love upon its feet.

I observed that the Baul's song too was speaking this very same truth. Now and again, into this bound cage, the unknown bird enters and speaks of that unbound, unknowable freedom—the mind wishes to hold it forever fast, yet cannot. Who but

the melody of song can bring us news of this unknown bird's silent coming and going!

For this very reason, I always feel a certain hesitation about printing books of songs. For, in the printed book of a song, the essential thing itself gets left out. To arrange the mere instruments of music, leaving out music itself—how would that be, but like keeping hold of Ganapati's mouse while discarding Ganapati himself?

THE BANKS OF THE GANGES

When I returned from the very beginning stretch of my journey toward England, Jyotidada was then living at the garden-house of Chandannagar, on the bank of the Ganges—I took shelter with them. The Ganges again! That inexpressible languid delight, entangled with melancholy and restlessness, those nights and days resonant with lapping water along the moist, green riverbank! There lay my true place; there did the food served by a mother's own hand truly nourish me. For me, this sky-filling light of Bengal, this southern breeze, this flowing Ganges, this royal languor, this vast, horizon-spreading, generous leisure lying between the blue of the sky and the green of the earth, into which I could surrender my entire body and mind—was as essential as water to the thirsty and food to the hungry. That is not, after all, so very long ago—yet even in that short span, much has already changed. Into the secluded nooks of our shade-canopied riverbanks, factory-chimneys have entered like upward-hissing serpents, breathing forth their black breath with a hissing sound. Now, even in our minds, at the height of the burning summer, Bengal's spacious, cool shade has grown narrower still. Now everywhere in the country restlessness has thrust in its own hundred arms and taken hold. Perhaps that is well enough—but that it is unbroken good, this too I cannot assert with any certainty.

Those beautiful days of mine upon the riverbank went floating away, one by one, like fully-bloomed lotus flowers offered up to the Ganges' waters. Sometimes, on days of thick, dense monsoon rain, I would set Vidyapati's line "Bhara badar mah bhadar" to a tune of my own choosing on the harmonium, and pass the entire rain-drenched, madly restless afternoon singing the raga of the rains; sometimes, at the hour of sunset, we would take out a boat—Jyotidada playing the violin, I singing—beginning from Puravi raga, and by the time we arrived at Behag, the golden toy-factory of the western sky would have entirely, silently, closed up shop, and the moon would rise from the eastern horizon. When we returned to the garden's ghat and sat upon bedding spread on the terrace facing the river, there would be pure peace over both water and land, hardly a boat upon the river, the line of trees on

the far bank merged into darkness, and light glimmering upon the waveless flow of the river.

The garden we stayed in was known by the name of Moran Sahib's Garden. Climbing up from the Ganges, the steps of the ghat, paved in stone, led to a long, spacious veranda. That veranda was the veranda of the house itself. The rooms were not all on one level—some rooms were on an upper floor, some required descending two or three steps of stairs. Nor did all the rooms follow the same line. Right above the ghat, the windows of the drawing-room had panes of coloured glass set with pictures. One picture showed a swing hung from the branch of a tree densely covered with foliage—upon that swing, in a secluded bower dappled with sunlight and shade, two figures swung together; another picture showed men and women, adorned in festive dress, descending the staircase of some fortress-palace. Light would fall upon the glass panes, and these pictures would appear brightly illuminated. These two pictures seemed to fill that riverbank sky with a melody of festivity. Some far-off country's, some far-off era's celebration seemed to spread its wordless tale, glittering, into the light—and somewhere, within some eternally secluded shadow, the romantic sweetness of that swinging pair would stir, amid the row of trees along the riverbank, the pathos of some unspoken, unfinished tale. At the very top of the house was a round room, open on all four sides. There I made my place for writing poetry. Sitting there, nothing met the eye save the tops of the dense trees and the open sky. It was then that the composition of Sandhya-Sangeet was still underway—it was with an eye toward this very room that I wrote:

In the lap of this boundless sky
Amid drifting, swaying clouds—
Here have I built my home
For your sake, my poetry.

From this time onward, a certain criticism began to arise among literary critics concerning me—that I was a poet of broken, half-formed rhythms and half-

articulate language. That everything of mine was hazy, shadowy. However unwelcome this observation was to me at the time, it was not without foundation. In truth, those poems possessed scarcely any solidity of real, worldly existence. Having been raised from childhood, sheltered so very far from ordinary human society, where could I possibly have found material for writing? But there is one thing I cannot accept. When they called my poetry "hazy," they would, along with that, add this taunt too, whether expressed or implied—as though it were some kind of fashionable affectation. A person whose own eyesight is quite excellent often grows irritated upon seeing some young man wearing spectacles, and thinks: he must be wearing those spectacles merely as an ornament. The poor fellow may genuinely see poorly—this defect might be granted—but to pretend to see poorly, that would indeed be going somewhat too far.

Just as a nebula cannot be called something outside creation altogether, since it is a genuine phase of a particular stage of creation—so too, dismissing the inchoate quality of poetry as mere pretense denies a certain genuine truth of literature itself. There comes upon man, at certain particular states, an emotion which is the sensation of the inexpressible, which is the restlessness of incompleteness. This is a truth of human nature; how then can we call its expression false? It would not be quite accurate to say that such poetry has no root at all—though one might argue that it has little value. But to say it has absolutely no value at all would surely be an overstatement. For, through poetry, man attempts to express his own heart in language; if some recognizable portrait of some state of that heart becomes expressed in some piece of writing, then man treasures and preserves it—if it is not expressed, then he discards it. Therefore there is no sin in expressing the inexpressible turmoil of the heart—the only fault lies in failing to express what deserves expression. There exists a certain duality within man. The person who sits deep within, behind all the external events, all the thoughts and emotions of outer life, we do not know well and tend to forget—but we cannot, in the course of life, ever entirely erase his existence. When the melody of his inner self does not harmonize with the outer world—when that harmony fails to become beautiful and complete—then that inner dweller's suffering causes the mental nature distress. We cannot give this feeling any particular name—it has no description—and for this reason, whatever language of lamentation it possesses is not a clear, distinct

language; within it, there is more of meaningless melody than meaning-bound words. Whatever sorrow and pain Sandhya-Sangeet has sought to express, its root truth lies within that very mystery of the inner self. Where there exists a certain unity of one's entire life, there life was somehow unable, by any means, to arrive. Just as consciousness overwhelmed by sleep struggles against a nightmare, striving somehow to awaken, so too that inner spark struggles likewise to cut through all the outer world's entanglement and free itself—the history of that struggle, occurring in the deepest, most unseen region of the inner self, has found expression in Sandhya-Sangeet through an indistinct language. Just as in all creation there is the interplay of two forces, so too within the creation of poetry. Where disharmony is excessively dominant, or where harmony is entirely complete, there, I suspect, poetry cannot properly be written at all. It is precisely where, amid disharmony, suffering is powerfully struggling to attain and express harmony, that poetry breaks forth from the constraint of the flute, bursting into melody like a sigh.

When Sandhya-Sangeet was born, no conch shells were blown loudly in the birthing chamber, it is true—but that does not mean no one took it up with affection. I have mentioned in another essay elsewhere—at the door of the wedding assembly of the eldest daughter of the esteemed Ramesh Dutt, Bankim Babu stood waiting; Ramesh Babu was about to place a garland around Bankim Babu's neck, when I happened to arrive there. Bankim Babu at once placed that garland instead around my neck, saying, "This garland rightfully belongs to him—Ramesh, have you read Sandhya-Sangeet?" He replied, "No." Bankim Babu then expressed his opinion concerning some poem from Sandhya-Sangeet, by which I felt myself richly rewarded.

PRIYA BABU

It was through the writing of this very Sandhya-Sangeet that I gained a friend whose enthusiasm, like a favourable wind, breathed life into my endeavours in poetic composition. He was the esteemed Priyanath Sen. Having earlier read Bhagnahriday, he had given up hope for me—but with Sandhya-Sangeet, I won over his opinion. Those who knew him will know that he was a sailor upon the seven seas of literature. His familiarity roamed freely along the broad avenues and narrow lanes of nearly every literature, native and foreign alike. Sitting with him, one could behold, all at once, the distant horizon of the entire realm of thought. That proved immensely valuable for me. He could discuss literature with full boldness and confidence—his likes and dislikes were never merely matters of personal taste. On the one hand, entry into the treasury of world literature's essence, and on the other, reliance upon and faith in one's own creative power—it is impossible to say how much benefit his friendship, regarding these two matters, rendered me at the very outset of my youth. Whatever poems I wrote in those days, I recited every one of them to him, and it was through his very joy that my poems received, as it were, their consecration. Had I not had this opportunity, that cultivation of my first youth would not have received its rains, and it is difficult to say how abundant a harvest my poetry would later have yielded.

MORNING SONGS

Sitting by the banks of the Ganges, besides Sandhya-Sangeet, I also wrote some prose pieces. These too were not any bound, prescribed writing—these too were, in a sense, written however I pleased. Just as children hold onto kites in idle play, so it was with these. When spring comes into the kingdom of the mind, small, short-lived, colourful fancies fly up and float away—no one takes any notice of them—but the whim came to me to hold onto some of these for my leisure hours. The truth is, I was then caught up in a certain whimsical mood—the mind kept saying, puffed up with pride: I shall write whatever I please—what I would write, I had no notion—only this excitement, that I myself was writing it. These small pieces of prose writing were, at one time, published in book form under the title Bibidha Prasanga (Various Topics)—at the end of the first edition they were given a proper burial, and in the second edition they were not granted a new lease of life.

I believe it was at this same time that I began writing a rather substantial novel titled Bouthakuranir Haat (The Young Queen's Market).

In this manner, having spent some time on the banks of the Ganges, Jyotidada came to live, for a while, at No. 10 Sudder Street near the Chowringhee Museum. I stayed with him. Here too, bit by bit, I was writing Bouthakuranir Haat, and, poem by poem, Sandhya-Sangeet, when suddenly some kind of upheaval occurred within me.

One day, at the close of afternoon, I was wandering upon the terrace of the Jorasanko house. Upon the melancholy of the day's ending, the glow of sunset had merged, and that day's approaching evening appeared to me particularly enchanting. Even the walls of the neighbouring houses appeared beautiful to me. I began to think to myself—has this veil of triviality lifted entirely from the familiar world merely through some magic trick of evening's play of light? Never could that be so. I could see quite clearly that the real cause of this was that evening had come

into me—that I myself had been shrouded. During the day, when I myself had been so intensely harsh, whatever I had been seeing and hearing, I had entangled and enveloped it all within myself. Now, because that "I" had withdrawn, I was seeing the world in its own true form. That true form was never trivial—it was joyful and beautiful. After this, from time to time, I would deliberately try, as it were, to withdraw myself and observe the world as a spectator, and then my mind would grow joyful. I remember trying, one day, to explain to some relative at home how the world could be seen in a way that would reveal its true form correctly, while simultaneously lightening one's own burden—I know I did not succeed in the least. It was at this time that I gained an experience of my life which I have never forgotten to this day.

Where Sudder Street's road comes to an end, I believe one can see the trees of the Free School's garden. One morning I stood on the veranda and looked in that direction. At that moment, the sun was rising from behind the foliage of those trees. As I stood gazing, suddenly, in a single moment, a veil seemed to fall away from before my eyes. I saw the entire universe bathed in an extraordinary splendour, waves of joy and beauty surging on every side. Whatever covering of sorrow had lain, layer upon layer, within my heart, was pierced through in an instant, and the light of the universe came pouring, all at once, into my entire being. That very day the poem "Nirjharer Swapnabhanga" (The Waterfall's Awakening from a Dream) came gushing forth as if of its own accord, like the very waterfall it describes. The writing came to an end, but that joyous form of the world had not yet, even then, faded away. It came about that thereafter nothing and no one remained unpleasant to me. That very day, or the day after, an incident occurred which astonished me myself. There was a man who would occasionally ask me this sort of question: "Now tell me, sir, have you ever actually seen God with your own eyes?" I would have to admit, I had not—then he would say, "I have seen Him." If I asked, "How did you see Him," he would answer that he saw Him flickering before his eyes. Conducting philosophical discussion with such a person cannot always be pleasant. Especially since, at that time, I was usually caught up in the whim of writing. But since the man was good-natured, I could not bring myself to turn him away, and I would endure it all.

This time, when that man arrived at midday, I welcomed him with complete delight, saying, "Come, come." Whatever foolish and strange sort of person he was, that outer covering of his seemed to have fallen away. Whomever I looked upon and felt joy, and welcomed with open arms, was that person's inner self—I felt no discord with him, but rather a sense of kinship. When I looked upon him and felt no distress at all, felt no sense that my time was being wasted, I felt great joy—I felt that this false web of mine had been cut through, that the pain I had repeatedly inflicted upon myself all this while regarding this matter had been illusory and unnecessary.

I would stand upon the veranda, and whoever passed along the road—porters, labourers—their manner of movement, the build of their bodies, their facial expressions, seemed to me marvellously strange; everyone seemed to be flowing along like the play of waves upon a boundless ocean. From childhood I had grown accustomed merely to seeing with the eyes—now, it seemed, I began to see with my entire consciousness. When along the road one young man, placing his hand upon another young man's shoulder, would walk along laughing, effortlessly, I could no longer regard this as a trivial event—I seemed to see, in that very moment, the fountain of some boundless, deathless delight, springing from the unfathomable depths of the universe, scattering its cascade of laughter in every direction.

While engaged in the most trivial task, the variety of movement expressed through every limb and gesture of a person—something I had never before noticed—now, moment by moment, the very music of the movement of the entire human body enchanted me. I did not see all this as separate, isolated things—I saw a totality. At this very moment, throughout every corner of the earth, in every dwelling place, every occupation, every need, millions upon millions of human beings were stirring restlessly—seeing that earth-spanning restlessness of all mankind's bodily movement gathered together, vastly, as one, I caught a glimpse of some great vision of beauty. A friend laughing with a friend, a mother tending her child, one cow standing beside another, licking its body—within all these there existed a

certain boundless immeasurability that struck my mind with the wound of wonder. It was at this time that I wrote:

How strangely has my heart opened today,
The world has come there to embrace me—

This is not poetic exaggeration of fancy. In truth, I did not possess the power to express fully what I had experienced.

For some time I remained in this state of self-forgetting joy. At this juncture, Jyotidada and his family decided they would go to Darjeeling. I thought—this shall be well for me too. Whatever I had seen amid the crowds of Sudder Street's city, I would see even better, more profoundly, amid the majestic rocky peaks of the Himalayas. At the very least, I would come to know how the Himalayas reveal themselves through that vision.

But it was that trivial house on Sudder Street that won the day. When I climbed up into the Himalayas and looked around, suddenly, I found, that vision was no longer there. I suppose it had perhaps been my fault to imagine that I would obtain the real thing from without. However great the Himalayan king may be, unattainable in majesty though he is, he cannot place anything directly into one's hand—yet the one who actually bestows can, within a single lane, in a single moment, reveal the entire universe to view.

I wandered through the deodar forest, sat by the edge of waterfalls, bathed in their waters, gazed upon the cloud-free majesty of Kanchenjunga—but wherever I had thought it easy to find, there I found nothing at all. I had gained acquaintance, but I no longer found the vision itself. I had been seeing a jewel; suddenly it became sealed shut, and now I saw only its casket. But however elaborate the

craftsmanship adorning the casket might be, there no longer remained any risk of mistaking it merely for an empty box.

The song of Prabhat-Sangeet fell silent; only its distant echo, so to speak—a poem titled "Pratidhwani" (The Echo)—I wrote in Darjeeling. It became such an incomprehensible matter that two friends once wagered a bet, taking upon themselves the task of determining its meaning. In despair, one of them came secretly to me to inquire the meaning. I doubt very much that, with my assistance, the poor fellow managed to win his wager. There was, at least, this much comfort in the matter—that neither party had to pay the wager money to the other. Alas, how far away now lies that time of exceedingly clear composition, when I wrote poetry upon the lotus and upon the lake of the rainy season.

No one, after all, writes poetry merely to explain something. The heart's feeling seeks to take shape through the medium of poetry. This is why, upon hearing a poem, if someone says "I did not understand it," one finds oneself in considerable difficulty. If someone smells a flower's fragrance and says "I understand nothing of this," one must tell them: there is nothing here to understand—it is merely fragrance. Comes the reply: "That I know, but why should it be fragrance at all—what is its meaning?" One must either refuse to answer this, or else answer in some rather vague, roundabout fashion—that the inner joy of nature expresses itself in this manner, as fragrance. But the difficulty lies here: whatever words man uses to write poetry, those words themselves carry meaning. This is precisely why the poet has had to devise many artifices—rhyme-schemes and the like—overturning the natural manner of ordinary speech, so that the emotional quality of the words might become large enough to cover, as far as possible, the literal meaning of the words. This emotional quality is neither philosophy nor science, nor any kind of practical matter—it is merely the countenance of the inner self, like tears in the eyes or a smile upon the lips. You may, if you can, combine it with philosophical wisdom, science, or any other product of intellect—but that remains secondary. If, while crossing on a ferry-boat, you manage to catch fish as well, that is your own cleverness—but that does not make the ferry-boat a fishing vessel; it would be

unjust to curse the ferryman merely because his ferry-boat does not export fish commercially.

The poem "Pratidhwani" is a piece I wrote long ago—it never caught anyone's eye, and so I need not answer to anyone for it today. Whatever its worth, good or bad, I can assert with confidence that this poem was not written deliberately to puzzle readers, nor was it an attempt to smuggle in, through poetry, some profound philosophical doctrine by stealth.

The truth is, a certain restlessness had accumulated within the heart, and it wished to express itself. Unable to find any other name for the object of that restlessness, it called it "Echo" and said:

O Echo,
I think I love you,
I think I love no one else.

At the very centre of the universe, some song's resonance is stirring—striking against the beloved's face, striking against all the beautiful things of this universe, whose echo comes and enters into our hearts. It is not any single object, but this very echo, I suspect, that we love—for it has been observed that on one day we did not so much as glance toward something, and on another day that very same object has stolen away our entire heart.

For so long, I had seen the world only through outer vision, and for this reason I had never beheld its complete, joyous form. One day, suddenly, a ray of light, released as it were from some deep centre within my inner self, spread over the entire universe—and then that world could no longer be seen merely as a heap of events and a heap of objects; I saw it filled, complete, from beginning to end. From this arose a certain feeling within my mind: that from some deepest cavern of the

inner self, a stream of melody comes forth and spreads through space and time—and, in the form of an echo, being reflected back from all space and time, returns again to that very source, in a flow of joy. It is the echo of that face, turned toward the Infinite, that makes our minds restless with beauty. When the artist, from the fullness of his heart's source, releases a song, that itself is one joy; but when the stream of that song returns again into his very own heart, that is a joy doubled. When the World-Poet's song of creation, having become filled with joy, flows back into His own consciousness, then, if we allow that very current to flow over our own awareness too, we may know, in some inexpressible way, the world's ultimate consummation. Wherever we attain that realization, there lies our love; there our mind too, restless with the pull of that joy-current turning toward the Infinite, longs to release itself in that direction. This is the true meaning of beauty's restlessness. Whatever melody comes forth from the Infinite and moves toward the finite—that is truth, that is good, that is bound by law, definite in form; whatever echo of that same melody returns once more from the finite toward the Infinite—that is beauty, that is joy. It cannot be grasped or held fixed in one's hand, and so it forsakes its home in just this manner. In the poem "Pratidhwani," this very feeling of mine has sought to find expression in form and melody. One cannot hope that the fruit of that endeavour will emerge entirely clear, for the endeavour itself did not fully know itself clearly.

At a somewhat later age, I wrote a letter concerning Prabhat-Sangeet, a portion of which I quote here—

"In this world there is no one, everyone lives only for me'—this is a particular state belonging to a particular age. When the heart first awakens and stretches out both arms, it feels as though it wants the entire world—just as a newly-toothed infant imagines he could put the entire universe into his mouth.

"Gradually one comes to understand what the mind truly wants and what it does not. Then that all-encompassing vapour of the heart begins to burn and set ablaze within a narrower confine. Claiming the entire world all at once yields nothing at

all; at last, if one can become wholly absorbed, with one's entire life and mind, within some one particular thing, then alone is the great gateway into the Infinite found. Prabhat-Sangeet is the very first outward-turning overflow of my inner nature—for this reason, no discrimination whatsoever need be applied to it."

The generalized, diffuse joy of that first overflow gradually pushes us toward particular, specific acquaintance—the water of a pond, as it were, gradually seeks to emerge as a river; then courtship gradually ripens into love. In truth, love is, in one sense, narrower than courtship. It does not take the whole in a single grasp, but rather presses close upon it, portion by portion, gradually. Love, when concentrated, can enjoy the whole even within a part, the infinite even within the finite. Then its consciousness, precisely through the concrete and particular, extends itself into the abstract and infinite. Then whatever it gains is not merely some vague emotional joy of its own mind—having become united wholly with the external, with the concrete, its heart's feeling rises to become a truth pervading all things.

In the esteemed Mohit Babu's collected works, the poems of Prabhat-Sangeet have been given the name "Nishkraman" (Emergence). This is because it marks the tidings of the first emergence from the forest of the heart into the outer world. Afterward, through joy and sorrow, light and darkness, this heart, a traveller upon the path of worldly life, has, bit by bit, in various melodies and various rhythms, brought about the union of the universe in manifold ways—eventually, this very stream of acquaintance, flowing through the many constructed ghats of this manifold variety, will surely arrive once more, on some other day, at the vastness of the Infinite—but that vastness will no longer be indeterminate; it will be the full expansion of complete truth.

In my very childhood, I had a very simple and intimate connection with the natural universe. Every single coconut tree within our house appeared to me utterly, vividly real. Returning by carriage from Normal School after four o'clock, the moment I stepped down from the carriage, I would see, behind our terrace, dense, moist

blue-black clouds gathered in a mass—my mind would instantly become uncovered, exposed within a profound joy—that moment I have never forgotten to this day. The moment I awakened each morning, the entire world's joyous exuberance of life would call out to my mind as though it were a playmate summoning me forth to play; at midday, the whole sky and every hour would seem to grow so intensely sharp that it would isolate me, in its own depths, in solitude; and the darkness of night would open some secret door along a path of enchantment that, transgressing the boundary of the possible and impossible, would carry me across the seven seas and thirteen rivers into the wondrous realm of fairy tale. Then, one day, when in the first stirrings of youth the heart began demanding its own nourishment, that easy, natural connection between life and the outer world grew obstructed. Then, surrounding the wounded heart, a turning inward upon itself began—consciousness then remained bound, confined, entirely within itself. In this manner, through the confinement of that sickened heart, whatever harmony had existed between the inner and the outer broke apart, and I lost that simple, natural right that had been mine since childhood; it is precisely that suffering which Sandhya-Sangeet has sought to express. At last, one day, that closed door—by what shock I know not—suddenly broke open, and then I regained what I had lost. Not merely regained it—through the very interval of separation, I gained a fuller, more complete acquaintance with it. When the easy is made difficult, and only then regained, that regaining alone becomes truly meaningful. For this reason, when I regained, in Prabhat-Sangeet, the world of my childhood once more, I gained it far more richly than before. In this manner, through nature's easy union, separation, and reunion, a certain chapter of the first phase of life came to its conclusion. To say it "came to its conclusion" would, however, be somewhat untrue. This very chapter began again, more variegated still, and proceeded, through yet another, more difficult problem, toward a still greater culmination. A particular human being comes into life to complete a particular chapter—stage by stage, that cycle expands, growing in ever-widening circumference as it proceeds—each turn, suddenly, appears distinct and separate, yet upon closer examination, one finds the centre remains ever the same.

While I was writing Sandhya-Sangeet, fragmentary prose pieces were being published under the title Bibidha Prasanga. And when I was writing Prabhat-

Sangeet, or somewhat afterward, similar prose writings were collected and printed in a book called Alochana (Discussion). Reading the difference that has arisen between these two prose collections, it is not difficult to determine the direction in which the writer's mind was moving.

RAJENDRALAL MITRA

At this time, the idea arose in Jyotidada's mind of gathering together Bengal's literary figures and establishing a single academy. The establishment of a standardized Bengali terminology, and the general nourishment of the Bengali language and literature by all possible means, was the purpose of this assembly. There was scarcely any difference between the purpose for which the present-day Sahitya Parishad (Literary Academy) has come into being and that of this proposed assembly.

The esteemed Rajendralal Mitra accepted this proposal with enthusiasm. He was made president of this assembly. When I went to invite the esteemed Vidyasagar to join this assembly, having heard its purpose and the names of its members, he said, "I would advise you to leave people like us out of it—nothing will come of gathering together a group of 'big shots'; no two of them will ever agree." Saying this, he refused to join the assembly. Bankim Babu did become a member, but I cannot say what use was made of him in the assembly's work.

To speak plainly, for as many days as the assembly survived, Rajendralal Mitra alone did all the work. We first took up the matter of determining geographical terminology. The entire first draft of the terminology was settled by Rajendralal himself. This was printed and distributed to all the members for discussion. We also had the intention of recording the names of all countries of the world according to their pronunciation as customarily used in each respective country.

Vidyasagar's words proved true—it turned out impossible to accomplish anything by gathering "big shots" together. The assembly, having barely blossomed, withered away.

But Rajendralal Mitra was a man of many parts. He alone constituted an entire assembly by himself. It was on this occasion that I had the honour of becoming acquainted with him.

Up to this point, I had made the acquaintance of many great literary figures in Bengal, but no one's memory remains as brightly alive within my mind as that of Rajendralal.

At the garden in Maniktala where the Court of Wards was located, I would go, from time to time, to visit him. I would go in the morning—I would find him engaged in his scholarly work. Owing to the thoughtlessness of youth, I would interrupt his work without hesitation. But never once did I see him displeased on that account, not even for a moment. The instant he saw me, he would set aside his work and begin conversing with me. Everyone knew he was hard of hearing. For this reason, as far as possible, he would give me no opportunity to ask questions. Raising some grand topic, he would carry on speaking himself. It was to hear his words on such matters that I went to see him. In conversation with no one else have I found so many new subjects to ponder upon. I would listen to his conversation, utterly enthralled. I believe he was, in those days, a leading member of the Textbook Selection Committee. Whatever books were sent to him, he would read, annotating them with pencil marks. Occasionally, taking some such book as his starting point, he would speak on matters of Bengali linguistic usage and philology, from which I derived immense benefit. There was scarcely any subject on which he had not deeply reflected, and whatever subject formed the topic of his discourse, he could expound it with perfect lucidity. If, at the time when the attempt was made to establish that Bengali Literary Society, work had been entrusted to Mitra Mahashay alone, without the slightest deference to any other member, I have no doubt that much of the present Literary Academy's work would have been carried forward considerably by that one man alone.

That he was merely a thoughtful writer was not his chief glory. His very presence seemed to make his humanity directly manifest. Even toward an immature person

like myself, he showed not the slightest contempt, but conversed with me, with the greatest generosity, on the most important of subjects—and yet, in vigour and vitality, none in those days could match him. Indeed, I once managed to extract from him an essay titled "Yamer Kukur" (The Dog of Death) and had it printed in Bharati—I would not have dared to impose in such a manner upon any other renowned writer of that time, nor could I have hoped for such indulgence. Yet in his warrior-guise, his fierce form was formidable indeed. In municipal councils and senate assemblies, all his opponents walked in fear of him. In those days, Krishnadas Pal was the strategist, while Rajendralal was the man of strength. Never, even against the greatest of adversaries, did he ever shy away from combat, nor did he ever know defeat. In matters concerning the publication of books and the discussion of antiquities for the Asiatic Society, he employed many Sanskrit scholars in his work. I recall that, on this occasion, many envious detractors of great men in those days used to say that it was the scholars who did the work while Mitra Mahashay reaped the fruits of their fame, cheating them of their due. Even today one occasionally sees such instances, where a person who is merely an instrument gradually comes to think—surely it is I who am truly capable, and the instrument merely an unnecessary ornament. Had the pen possessed consciousness, surely, one day, while writing, it would have come to think to itself—it is I who do all the work of writing, while the writer's fingers merely get soiled with ink while the writer's fame alone grows bright.

This one extraordinarily brilliant man of Bengal received, after his death, no particular honour from the people of his country. One reason for this is that, shortly after his death, Vidyasagar's death occurred—and in that grief, the sorrow of Rajendralal's passing vanished from the country's mind. Another reason is that the extent of his achievement in the Bengali language was not so very great, and for this reason he never had the opportunity to establish himself in the hearts of the general populace of his country.

CARWAR

After this, for some time, we of the Sudder Street household took refuge upon the seashore at Carwar.

Carwar is the principal town of Karnataka, situated in the southern part of the Bombay Presidency. It is the land of the sandalwood tree and cardamom, the country of the Malaya hills. My second brother was then a judge there.

This small seaport, encircled by hills, is so secluded, so hidden away, that a city has never been able to manifest its urban character here. The crescent-shaped shore stretches out its two arms toward the shoreless blue waters—as though it were an embodied yearning to embrace the infinite. Along the edge of the vast sandy shore stands a dark forest of tall casuarinas; at one boundary of this forest a small river named Kalanadi comes and merges with the sea, flowing between the coastlines of two hill-ranges. I remember one evening, at dusk during the bright fortnight, we set out in a small boat, rowing up this Kalanadi against the current. At one place, going ashore, we saw an ancient hill-fort of Shivaji's, and then set our boat afloat again. Amid the silent forest, the hills, and upon the waters of that secluded, narrow river's current, the moonlit night, seated in meditation, cast over us its magic spell of moonbeams. We landed and went up into a farmer's cottage, its swept courtyard fenced round and clean. Where the moonlight came slanting down across the sloping shadow of the courtyard wall, there, before their veranda, we spread our seats and took our meal. On the way back, the boat was let loose to drift with the current.

It took long before we came near the mouth of the sea. There, getting down from the boat, we walked along the sandy shore toward home. It was then the depth of night, the sea without waves, the ceaseless murmuring restlessness of the casuarina groves entirely stilled; along the far-flung expanse of sand the shadow-mass of the tree-line lay motionless, and on the rim of the horizon the bluish hill-

range lay sunk in a pale, dim sky. Through the midst of this vast whiteness and profound stillness, we, a few human beings, casting black shadows, moved on in silence. When we reached home, into what depth deeper than sleep my sleep sank that night—the poem that I wrote that very night is bound up with one bygone night upon that distant shore of exile. Doubting how it might appear to readers were it severed from that memory, it was not published in Mohit Babu's edition of my collected works. But I hope that if it is given a place here, within these Reminiscences, it will not amount to any trespass on its part.—

I go, I go, I sink, I sink,
more and more I sink and drown,
faint, inert, unconscious.

In what place, in what distance,
in what depth of night
do I go, sinking down?

O Earth, beneath my feet,
give no hindrance, give me none,
let me go, oh let me go.

Endless, through day and night,
let me thus remain, sinking—
do you go far away.....

You keep gazing, drinking moonlight's nectar,
faint, dissolved, the stars;
O boundless horizon,
stay above this head,
spreading two wings on either side.

No song, no words, no sound, no touch,
no sleep, no waking—
nowhere does anything stir, moonlight touches every limb,
every limb thrilled, unconscious.
In the boundless blue void
where has the universe floated away,
that it cannot be seen;
in the midst of night, alone,
great, solitary, am I
sinking, oh where, into what depths!
Sing, O universe, sing you
from far, invisible,
sing then the boatman's song—
with a hundred thousand passengers
where are you going,
thinking this, I close my eyes.
Endless night, only
I sink, I drown,
I die into boundless sweetness—
from point to point becoming point,
I go merging, mingling
into the far, far distance of the infinite.

This much must be said here: it is not always true that when the heart, from some fresh access of feeling, brims to overflowing, the writing produced then must needs

be good. That is the season for gushing phrases. Just as it will not do for the poet and the feeling to stand entirely apart, so complete absence of distance is equally unfavourable to the making of poetry. It is upon the palette of memory that the colour of verse blooms best. The immediate carries with it a certain tyranny—unless one can, to some degree, escape its rule, imagination cannot find its own room to move. Not only in poetry, but in every kind of artistic craft, there must be a certain disinterestedness in the maker's temper—the creator that dwells within the human heart must hold the reins in his own hand. If the subject of a composition tries to override and dominate its maker, then it becomes a mere reflection, not a true likeness.

NATURE'S REVENGE

It was here, at Carwar, that I wrote the dramatic poem entitled *Prakritir Pratishodh* — Nature's Revenge. Its hero, a sannyasi, having severed every bond of affection, every bond of illusion, and conquered Nature, wished to realize the Infinite in utter, unmixed purity. The Infinite, as it were, lay wholly outside all things. At last a young girl binds him with the noose of tenderness and draws him back, out of his meditation upon the Infinite, into the midst of the world. When he returned, this is what the sannyasi beheld — that the great exists only by taking hold of the small, the infinite only by taking hold of the finite, freedom only by taking hold of love. Whenever we receive the light of love, then wherever we open our eyes, there we see: within the bounded there is no boundary at all.

That the beauty of Nature is not merely a mirage of my own mind — that within it the very joy of the Infinite stands revealed, and it is for this very reason that before such beauty we forget ourselves — this truth found its surest proving-ground upon that very shore of Carwar. In outward Nature, where the Infinite manifests Itself through the enchantment of law, we may, within the rigid bonds of that law, fail to see the Infinite at all; but where the heart, through beauty and through love, comes — quite without mediation — to touch that selfsame vastness even within the smallest thing, there what argument can prevail against the force of that direct perception? It was by this very path of the heart that Nature led the sannyasi from the narrow throne of his own finitude into the unconquered inner chamber of the Infinite. In this *Prakritir Pratishodh*, on the one side stand all the folk of the road, the men and women of the village, passing their days unthinkingly amid the small round of their home-built lives; on the other stands the sannyasi, striving somehow to blot out both himself and all creation into an infinite fashioned by himself alone, apart from hearth and home. When, upon the bridge of love, the divide between these two was dissolved — when householder and sannyasi met — then, meeting in the finite and the infinite together, both the false triviality of the one and the false emptiness of the other vanished away. In my own early life, just as I had once entered a certain nameless, dark cave within my own being and lost my simple, natural claim upon the world without, until at last, from that very outside world, a

lovely light broke in upon my heart and filled me, uniting me wholly with Nature once more — this Prakritir Pratishodh too was written as that same history, told after a somewhat different fashion. It has stood, besides, as a kind of prologue to all my later poetic labour. Indeed, it seems to me that this is the one continuous movement of my life's poetry — a movement that might be named: the seeking of union with the Infinite within the finite itself. This very thought I set down, in my last years, within a single line of verse —

It is not mine, that freedom won through renunciation.

Even then, in the small prose pieces I published under the name Alochana, I tried, from the very outset, to write a theoretical account of the idea buried within Prakritir Pratishodh. I discussed there how the finite, without being merely bound within itself, shows forth an unfathomable depth condensed into a single point. Whether that explanation carries any worth as theory, and what place Prakritir Pratishodh holds as poetry, I cannot say — but today I see clearly that this one idea, disguised in a hundred forms, has come, without my knowing it, to possess the whole of my writing down to this very day.

On the voyage back from Carwar, I wrote, aboard ship, several of the songs for Prakritir Pratishodh. With great joy I composed the first, sitting on the deck, singing it, note by note, into being —

O Nandarani, hear me——

set free our Shyam,

we are cowherd boys bound for pasture,

give back to us our Shyam.

The morning sun has risen, the flowers have opened, the cowherd boys are going out into the fields — that flowering, that wandering abroad, they do not wish to leave untenanted; it is there itself that they long to be united with their Shyam, there itself that they wish to behold the Infinite arrayed in ornament — it is there, in field and landing-place, in wood and hill, joining in the Infinite's play of joy, that they have come forth: not to any distant place, not into any splendour — their materials are of the humblest — a yellow cloth and a garland of wildflowers suffice entirely for their adornment. For, since joy dwells everywhere for one who possesses it, whoever goes seeking it in some grand quarter, and makes elaborate provision for its sake, is bound only to lose sight of it altogether.

Some while after our return from Carwar, on the twenty-fourth of Agrahayan in the year 1290, my marriage took place. I was then twenty-two years of age.

PICTURES AND SONGS

Under the title Chhabi o Gaan — Pictures and Songs — the poems I published were, for the most part, written during this period.

We were then living in a garden-house on Circular Road, near Chowringhee. To its south lay a great crowded settlement. I would often sit by the upstairs window and watch the life of that quarter — all the day's varied labour, its rest, its play, its comings and goings gave me the keenest pleasure; it seemed to me like some strange, endlessly unfolding tale.

The very manner of looking at things seemed, in those days, to take possession of me. Each separate scene I would behold as though set apart and framed round with the light of fancy and the mind's delight. Each particular sight, distinct in its own tone and colour, would strike upon my eye. In this way it gave me the greatest pleasure to build up, within my own imagination, these encircled pictures. It was nothing else, at bottom, than the desire to draw out and fix each fully-formed image — the wish to see, through the eye, the things of the mind, and through the mind, the seeing of the eye. Had I been able to paint with a brush, I should have tried to hold fast, with line and colour upon canvas, this restless seeing and shaping of the mind; but that means was not given into my hands. Only words and rhythm were mine. And even with words I had not yet learned to draw a sharp, decisive line, so that the colour would do nothing but spill and spread. Be that as it may — just as boys, receiving for the first time a box of paints, grow restless with the desire to daub all manner of pictures, this way and that, so I too, having newly come into possession of youth's many-coloured box, spent my days trying, quite by myself, to sketch out pictures of every sort. Comparing these efforts now with that two-and-twenty-year-old season of life, one might perhaps, even through their raw outlines and blurred colours, discover in them some trace of a face taking shape.

I have already written that with Prabhat Sangeet — Morning Songs — a chapter of my life closed. From Chhabi o Gaan the next movement began, in quite another manner. In the beginning of any undertaking there is much excess of material; as the work proceeds, that excess falls gradually away. In the early portion of this new phase there is, I think, a good deal that is superfluous. Had these been leaves upon a tree, they would surely have withered and dropped by now. But the pages of a book do not wither so easily; even when their season is past, they linger on. A certain habit of looking closely even at the most trifling things had its beginning here, in Chhabi o Gaan. Just as the melody of a song can lend depth even to the plainest words, so, seizing upon some slight occasion and steeping that theme in the essence of feeling, there arose in these pages a wish to redeem its very triviality. No — that is not quite right either. When the string of one's own mind lies tuned to a certain pitch, then the great symphony of the universe, rising from every quarter, wakes an answering note within it. On such a day, because some melody stood awake in the writer's inmost being, nothing without seemed trifling any longer. Some sudden thing, caught by the eye on a particular day, I would find had already begun to mingle with a certain strain of my own life's music. A small child, playing with dust, sand, shell or snail, whatever comes to hand, can do so freely, because play itself is awake within its mind; through the joy of its own inward play it can truly discover the world's play of joy as well, and therefore its playground is everywhere the same. In just the same way, on the day when, deep within, the song of our youth grows full of many melodies, we come, through that very perception, to know as true that in the myriad thousand strings of the world's great harp there is no place left unbound by its eternal music — and then whatever falls before the eye, whatever comes within reach of the hand, becomes at once the gathering-place of that music; there is no need to travel far.

THE BOY

Between Chhabi o Gaan and Kori o Komol, a monthly paper named Balak — The Boy — bore its fruit for about a year, like some medicinal herb, and then brought its little drama to a close.

My aunt, the wife of my second brother, had taken a particular interest in bringing out an illustrated paper for boys to read. It was her wish that Sudhindra, Balendra, and the other boys of our household should publish their own compositions in its pages. But finding that the paper could not run on their writing alone, she, having become its editor, asked me too to shoulder the burden of composition. After one or two numbers of Balak had appeared, I once went for a few days to see Rajnarayan Babu at Deoghar. Returning to Calcutta by the night train, which was crowded, I could not sleep well — a lamp burned directly above my eyes. I thought, since sleep would not come at all, I might use the occasion to think up a story for Balak. In the strain of that fruitless effort no story came, but sleep did. I dreamt that upon the steps of some temple a young girl, seeing the marks of sacrificial blood, was asking her father, in the most piteous distress, "Father, what is this! This — this is blood!" At her anguish, the father, wounded within, yet feigning anger outwardly, was trying somehow to smother her question. On waking, it struck me at once — here was a story granted to me in a dream. I have several other such dream-given tales, and other writings besides. Weaving this dream together with the ancient legend of Govinda Manikya, the king of Tripura, I began, month by month, to bring out in Balak the story of Rajarshi — The Royal Sage.

Those were days without any fixed anchor. Neither in my life nor in my prose and verse had any single purpose yet found the strength to declare itself with real concentration. I had not yet joined the throng of travellers upon the road; I only sat in the little roadside room. Various people passed along the road on various errands, and I would sit and watch them go — while the rains, the autumn, the spring would come to my chamber like uninvited guests from some distant country, and pass the hours with me there. But my business was not with rain and autumn

and spring alone. There was no end to the strange folk who, now and again, would find their way to my small room — like unmoored boats adrift, with no purpose of their own, only floating on. Among these, one or two fortune-forsaken souls would come with various pretexts, hoping to fill some want through me, without effort of their own. But no great cunning was needed to deceive me — my worldly burdens were light then, and I did not yet know deception for what it was. I gave stipends to many students to pursue long courses of study, for whom the stipend was needless and the study itself, from first to last, entirely fruitless. Once a long-haired boy brought me a letter, purportedly from his imaginary sister, in which she — imaginary as himself — entrusted to my care this brother of hers, tormented, she said, by an equally imaginary stepmother. In all this, only the brother was not imaginary — of that I gained certain proof. But just as it would be needless to take careful aim with a rifle at a bird that has not yet learned to fly, so too was the sister's letter, for my purposes, quite superfluous. Once a boy came with the news that he was reading for his B.A. but that some disorder of the head made it impossible for him to sit the examination. I grew anxious on hearing this, but, as with most other branches of learning, I had no skill in medicine either, and could not think how to comfort him. He said, "I dreamt that in a former life your wife was my mother; if I drink the water that has washed her feet, I shall be cured." Then, laughing a little, he added, "You probably don't believe any of this." I said, "Whether I believe it or not, may your illness, if it is to be cured at all, be cured." Calling it my wife's foot-water, I gave him a little plain water to drink. He drank it and felt a wondrous benefit. By degrees, in the fullness of expression, he passed quite easily from water to solid food. By degrees he took possession of a corner of my room, and, gathering his friends about him, set them all to smoking tobacco there. I, with some embarrassment, abandoned that smoke-filled chamber to him. Certain very gross incidents soon made it plain that whatever else ailed him, his wits, at least, suffered no weakness. After this it became difficult for me to disbelieve, without decisive proof, the claims of children from a former birth. I found that my reputation in this matter had spread abroad. One day I received a letter: a daughter of mine from a previous life sought my blessing for recovery from illness. Here I was obliged to stand firm and draw a line — I had already suffered enough grief over a son from a former life, and could by no means bring myself to accept a daughter as well.

Meanwhile my friendship with Sachchandra Majumdar had ripened. Almost every evening he and Priya Babu would come and settle into that corner of my room. The hours would run on late into the night with song and literary talk. Some days even the daylight hours would pass in just this way. The truth is, when the thing called a man's "I" has not yet grown vigorous and mature from every quarter, his life drifts on, unchecked, like a cloud of autumn — and such, in those days, was my own condition.

BANKIM BABU

It was at about this time that my acquaintance with Bankim Babu began. I had first seen him long before this. The old students of Calcutta University had jointly founded an annual gathering, of which Chandranath Basu was the chief support. He had hoped, I think, that at some distant date I too might find a place at this assembly — and in that hope he had once given me some poem to recite there. He was young then. I recall that, having resolved to read aloud himself an English rendering of some German war-poet's verses, he had recited them at our house with great enthusiasm. That the love-song of the poet's fair companion at Kabir's left hand, sword in hand, should once have been Chandranath Babu's favourite poem will show the reader that it was not only Chandranath Babu who was once young — the times themselves were somewhat different.

Wandering through the crowd at that gathering, I suddenly noticed, among the many faces, one man who stood apart from all the rest — one whom there seemed no possibility of merging into the general throng. On the face of that fair, tall figure I saw a pride, a radiance, so commanding that I could not restrain my wish to learn his name. Of all the people gathered there that day, of him alone did I ask who he was. When the answer came that it was Bankim Babu, my astonishment was great. I had long known him, through his writings, to be a man of greatness; that his very bearing should bear such evident witness to his distinction struck me forcibly that day. In his aquiline nose, his compressed lips, his keen glance, there was unmistakable evidence of great force. Standing with arms folded across his chest, he seemed to move apart from everyone; with no one did he appear to have the least familiarity — and this, above everything else, impressed itself most strongly upon me. He seemed to carry not merely the air of an intelligent, thoughtful writer, but something more — as though an invisible mark of royal anointment had been set upon his brow.

A small incident occurred there whose picture remains stamped upon my memory. In one room a Sanskrit scholar was reading out, to an audience, some elegiac verses

of his own composition on the subject of the motherland, together with their Bengali paraphrase. Bankim Babu, entering, stood apart in a corner. One line of the pandit's poem contained a metaphor — not obscene, but coarse. The very moment the pandit began to explain it, Bankim Babu, covering his mouth with his hand, hurried out of the room. From near the doorway, that sight of his hasty flight seems, even now, before my very eyes.

After that I wished many times to see him again, but no occasion arose. At last, once, while he held the post of Deputy Magistrate at Howrah, I found the courage to call upon him at his lodgings there. We met, and I did what I could to make conversation, but on my way back I carried home with me a certain shame of mind. That is to say, feeling myself altogether raw and unformed, I began to think it had not been well done of me to come, uninvited, into his presence.

Some years passed, and I grew somewhat older. Among the writers of that day I had gained a sort of standing as the youngest of the company — though just what that standing was, and where exactly it would settle, remained quite unclear. In the small measure of fame I was gradually acquiring there was mixed a good deal of doubt, and no small share of contempt as well. In those days our writers each bore some European nickname — one was Bengal's Byron, another her Emerson, another something else again; some, in mockery, had begun calling me Shelley — an insult to Shelley, and, for me, no less than ridicule. I had, by then, earned the title "poet of the colloquial tongue." I had neither learning nor much experience of life, and so whatever prose or verse I wrote held less of substance than of sentiment — one could hardly praise it, even wishing to, with much conviction. My dress and manner, too, showed the same unfinished character; my hair hung long and unkempt, and even my carriage displayed a fourth-rate, poetic affectation; I had become altogether ill-fitted for the world, unable to reach that easy accord with ordinary people's broad, familiar ways, and so could never fall into harmony with those around me.

At this time Akshay Sarkar brought out the monthly Nabajiban — New Life — to which I too contributed a piece or two.

Bankim Babu had by then closed the chapter of Bangadarshan and turned to religious discourse; Prachar was being published. I too, at that time, gave to Prachar a song, and a piece of prose composed round some Vaishnava lyric, expressing an overflow of feeling.

At about this time, or a little before it, I once again mustered courage to visit Bankim Babu, who then lived on Bhabanicharan Dutta Street. I went there readily enough, but little conversation ever passed between us. Mine, in those days, was the age for listening, not the age for speech. I longed for talk to flow, but hesitation held the words back. Now and then I would find Sanjib Babu reclining against a bolster, holding forth. To see him gave me the greatest pleasure. He was a genial man, who took delight in telling stories, and there was equal delight in hearing them from his lips. Those who have read his essays will surely have noticed that they were written with just that same abundant, conversational joy — the gift of making an assembly come alive even on the printed page. This is a power granted to very few; and the further power of carrying that same spoken freedom, unrestrained, into writing itself is seen in fewer still.

It was at this time that Shashadhar Tarkachudamani rose to prominence in Calcutta. I first heard his name from Bankim Babu's own lips; it was he, I believe, who first made him known to the wider public. The strange endeavour, then suddenly undertaken, to prove the pedigree of Hindu religion by citing the testimony of Western science spread, before one's eyes, in every direction. Theosophy had, for a long time already, been quietly preparing the ground for this movement in our country.

But it is not true that Bankim Babu gave this his full support. In the interpretation of religion that he set forth in Prachar, no shadow of Tarkachudamani ever fell — for that would have been altogether impossible.

I, by this time, was coming out of my corner; my writings of this period of controversy bear witness to it — some cast as satirical verse, some as farce, some as letters in the Sanjibani of that day. Having exhausted the enchantment of pure feeling, I had by now stepped into the wrestling-ground, and begun trying my own strength.

In the heat of that struggle a certain rift arose between Bankim Babu and myself as well. Its history lies recorded in the Bharati and Prachar of that day; a full account is not needed here. Unfortunately, I have since lost the letter Bankim Babu wrote me at the close of this quarrel — had it survived, readers would have seen with what complete and generous forgiveness he had rooted out even the last thorn of that dispute.

THE SHIP'S HULL

Having seen some advertisement in the papers, Jyotidada one day went off at midday to an auction, and returning, brought the news that he had bought a ship's hull for seven thousand rupees. Now an engine must be fitted, cabins built, and a whole ship raised upon it.

The men of our country wield the pen, ply the tongue, but do not sail ships — this grievance, I think, lay always in his heart. He had once tried to manufacture matches at home; for all the striking, they would not light. He had likewise thrown his enthusiasm into running a hand-loom mill at home, but that mill, having brought forth a single towel, has stood idle ever since. Later, in the effort to sail a ship by swadeshi enterprise, he suddenly bought an empty hull — and that hull, once filled, came to be filled not merely with engine and cabin, but with debt and utter ruin. Yet this much must be remembered: whatever loss came of these ventures, he alone bore and acknowledged it; and whatever profit accrued must surely still stand, even now, entered in his country's ledger. It is such reckless, visionary men of business who, again and again, send the flood of fruitless endeavour coursing over their country's field of labour; that flood comes suddenly and departs as suddenly, but the silt it leaves, layer upon layer, is what makes the soil of the nation fertile — and when harvest-day comes at last, no one, indeed, remembers them; yet they, who all their lives have borne only loss, will, even after death, accept this further loss without complaint.

On one side stood the British company, on the other he alone — and how fierce the commercial war upon the waters between these two grew, the people of Khulna and Barisal, I think, still remember. Under the spur of rivalry, ship after ship was built, loss followed upon loss, and as the margin of profit grew ever thinner, the surcharge on the fare vanished altogether — a golden age seemed about to dawn upon the steamer-route between Barisal and Khulna. Passengers not only began to travel free of fare, but to eat sweets without paying for them. On top of this, Barisal's band of volunteers, singing swadeshi kirtans, girded their loins and

set about gathering passengers, so that the ship never lacked for travellers — though every other want went on increasing without check. The zeal of patriotic goodwill found no way into the ledger; however loudly the kirtan resounded, however high excitement rose, arithmetic could not forget its own multiplication table — and so, leaping like a grasshopper, keeping neither triple nor sixfold time but its own, the enterprise went bounding, beat by beat, ever further along the road to ruin.

It is the peculiar misfortune of the visionary, sentimental man of business that people can read him at a glance, though he cannot read people at all; and merely to learn this much — that he cannot read them — costs him enormous expense and even greater delay, a lesson that never serves him in this life. It is such men who, passing again and again over the field of their country's labour, send the flood of fruitless striving coursing on; that flood comes suddenly and goes as suddenly, but the silt it leaves behind enriches, layer by layer, the soil of the land — and when harvest-time comes at last, none, indeed, remembers them; but they, having spent a whole lifetime bearing loss, will accept even this last loss, after death, without complaint.

In those days the daily bulletins of victory and defeat along the river-route of Khulna and Barisal kept our excitement without bound. At last, one day, word came that his ship, named Swadeshi, had struck the Howrah bridge and gone down. And so, when he had utterly and completely exceeded the very limit of his own resources, when nothing at all remained in reserve for himself, then, and only then, did his venture come to its end.

DEATH'S GRIEF

Meanwhile several deaths occurred, one after another, in our household. I had never before witnessed death face to face. When Mother died I was very young. She had long been ailing, and I did not even know how near her life had come to its close. Up to that time she used to sleep, on a separate bed, in the very room where we slept; but during her illness she was once taken by boat for some days for a change of air upon the Ganges, and afterward, on returning home, she stayed in a room on the third floor of the inner apartments. The night she died we were asleep; at what hour I do not know, an old servant came rushing into our room, crying out in tears, "Oh, what ruin has fallen upon you!" At once my elder sister-in-law scolded her sharply and hurried her out of the room, lest, deep in the night, some sudden shock strike too hard upon our young minds. In the dim, guttering lamplight I woke for an instant, felt my heart sink, but could not clearly understand what had happened. When I rose in the morning and heard the news of Mother's death, even then I could not fully grasp its meaning. Coming out to the veranda, I saw her body, richly adorned, laid upon a cot in the courtyard. But nothing in that form bore witness to death's terror — the face of death I saw that morning, in the light of dawn, was as tranquil and lovely as a sweet sleep. The dividing line between life and the end of life did not show itself clearly to my eyes. Only when they carried her body out through the front gate, and we walked behind toward the cremation ground, did the whole storm of grief break, in a single gust, into a great cry within me — that through this gate, on this threshold, Mother would never again, on any day, come and take her place in the household that had been her whole life's home. It was late when we returned from the burning-ground; at the turn of the lane I looked up toward Father's room on the third floor — he was sitting there still, motionless, upon the veranda before his door, absorbed in prayer.

She who was then the youngest daughter-in-law of the house took upon herself the charge of the motherless children. She it was who fed us and clothed us, and strove, day and night, to make us forget whatever we had lost. The power to forget a loss beyond repair, a parting beyond remedy, is one of the chief gifts of the life-force itself; in childhood that force remains young and vigorous, and takes no

wound deeply, engraves nothing in a lasting line. And so the first death that cast its dark shadow over my life passed, one day, silently away, like a shadow, without making its darkness eternal. Later, grown somewhat older, wandering about on spring mornings like one possessed, a fistful of half-opened, thick white bel-blossoms tied at the corner of my shawl, those soft, curled buds, swaying above my brow, would bring back to me, day after day, my mother's pale white fingers; I could see clearly that the very touch that had once lived at those fingertips was, day by day, coming to flower afresh, pure, within these bel-blossoms. In this world such touch has no end at all — only we forget it, and do not keep it in mind.

But the acquaintance I made with death in my twenty-fourth year was a lasting one. It has gone on, joining with every subsequent grief of parting, to lengthen the garland of tears. The light burden of a child's life brushes past even great deaths and hurries on unhindered; but at a riper age there is no path by which one may so easily cheat and evade death. And so, on that day, I had to take the full, unbearable blow upon a bared breast.

That there was, anywhere in life, even the smallest gap or crevice, I did not know until then; everything seemed woven, solid and seamless, of laughter and of tears together. Nothing could be seen beyond it, and so I had taken it, entirely, as final and complete. And then, from nowhere, death came, and in a single moment tore open a rift at the very edge of this so intensely palpable fabric of living — and what bewilderment fell upon my mind then! On every side, trees and earth, water, moon and sun, planets and stars, went on existing as before, each seemingly as certain a truth as ever; and yet, in the very midst of them, that which had been, like them, an equal truth — nay, that which, through a thousand daily touches of body, breath, heart, and mind, I had felt to be more true than all of them together — when that nearest of all people vanished so easily, in the twinkling of an eye, like something dreamed, then, looking out upon the whole world, I began to feel: what strange, what terrible severance of the self is this! That which remains, and that which has ceased to remain — by what means can these two ever be reconciled?

Through this rift in life there opened an unfathomable darkness that drew me, day and night, thereafter. I would wander here and there, only to come again and stand at that same spot, gazing into that darkness, forever searching for what might stand in the place of what was gone. Emptiness is a thing the human heart can never wholly believe. What does not exist seems false; what is false, we feel, cannot exist. And so the effort to see, within what we cannot see, and to find, within what we cannot attain, refuses, by any means, to cease. Surround a young plant with a wall of darkness, and all its strength will strain, by whatever means, to overcome that darkness, rising as straight as it can upon its little roots to lift its head into the light; just so, when death suddenly built its wall of "is not" round about the mind, the whole life-force strove, day and night, in ceaseless, desperate effort, to break through that very darkness into the light of "is." But when even the path across that darkness cannot be seen within the darkness itself, what sorrow can equal such sorrow?

And yet, through this unbearable grief, moment by moment, there began to blow through my mind a sudden breeze of joy, at which I myself would marvel. That life is not, after all, some unmoving, fixed and final thing — this very tiding of grief lightened, somehow, the weight upon my heart. That we are not prisoners forever within some wall built of unchanging truth — this thought filled me, inwardly, with a kind of exultation. What I had held, I was bound to release; and even as I felt the pain of this, viewed as loss, in that very same instant I felt, viewing it as release, a vast and generous peace. That the immense, world-wide burden of life and death regulates itself, of its own accord, flowing on every side, resting its weight upon none, so that the tyranny of the One Existence need never crush any single soul — this truth, that day, I seemed to grasp for the first time, as though it were some wonderful new discovery.

Through that very renunciation the beauty of Nature grew richer and more moving still. Because, for a time, my blind clinging to life had wholly fallen away, the swaying of the trees against the illumined blue sky, seen through eyes washed with tears, poured forth for me an extraordinary sweetness. The distance needed to see the world entire, and beautiful, death itself had granted me. Standing apart,

disinterested, I looked upon the picture of this world against the vast backdrop of death, and I knew it to be exceedingly lovely.

At this same time, for a while, a certain wild, unconventional temper showed itself again in both mind and manner. To regard the customs and proprieties of the world as some ultimate and solemn truth, dutifully observed at every turn, began to seem to me almost laughable. None of it, as it were, could touch me any longer. What anyone might think of me ceased, for a time, to trouble my mind at all. Wearing nothing but a coarse shawl over my dhoti and a pair of slippers, I would go for days together to Thacker's to buy books. My meals, too, fell into much disorder. For a while I took to sleeping, in rain or storm or winter cold alike, on the open veranda of the third floor; there I could look eye to eye with the stars of heaven, and my meeting with the light of dawn suffered no delay.

None of this, however, was the harsh discipline of true renunciation. It was rather a kind of holiday for me. When the schoolmaster of the world, cane in hand, seemed suddenly no more than an empty sham, I too grew reckless in tasting freedom, slipping past every petty rule of the schoolroom of life. If, waking some morning, I found that the world's gravity had lessened by exactly half, who then would trouble to walk carefully along the public road? Surely then the four- and five-storeyed houses of Harrison Road would go leaping and bounding along for no reason at all, and, taking the air upon the Maidan, should the Ochterlony Monument happen to stand in one's way, one would not trouble even to step around it, but clear it at a single bound. Something of that same condition had befallen me — once the pull of life slackened beneath my feet, I found it easy to abandon the beaten track altogether.

Alone, in the deep darkness on the roof of the house, I would wander the whole night through, groping with both hands like a blind man, as though seeking some banner atop a tower in the realm of the dead, some letter or sign engraved upon the black stone of its gateway. And then, at dawn, when the early light fell upon my bedding spread out there beneath the open sky, I would open my eyes to find the

veil about my mind grown transparent; just as, when mist clears, the rivers, hills, and forests of the earth grow suddenly bright and vivid, so the wide picture of the world of the living showed itself to me, dew-fresh, new, and beautiful.

RAIN AND AUTUMN

In certain years one planet or another gains ascendancy as king or minister, and of this the almanac gives its first hint, in the hushed converse of Pashupati and Haimabati. So too I find that, in each season of life, one particular time of year comes to hold special sway. Looking back toward childhood, I find that, of all things, the days of the monsoon stand out most sharply in memory. Under the driving wind the sloping veranda is swept with rain from end to end; door after door along the row of rooms stands shut; old Pyari, wrapped in a great sheet, comes home drenched through, wading in the flood-water with a basket of vegetables on her hip; and I run up and down the long veranda, for no reason at all, in a fever of delight. And again I remember being at school, our class seated in the cane-screened hall; the afternoon sky piling cloud on cloud until it is wholly overcast; and then, even as one watches, the rain coming down in unbroken sheets; now and again a long, single roll of thunder; some madwoman, it seems, tearing the sky's fabric from end to end with claws of lightning; the bamboo screens threatening, in each gust, to crash down; the letters of the book lost in the gloom — the master has given up the lesson; and I, giving myself over entirely to the storm and tumult outside, sit swinging my legs on the bench, sending my mind racing across some far desert plain. I remember too a deep night in Shravan, the steady drumming of heavy rain, heard through the gaps of sleep, building within the mind a thrill deeper even than the peace of sleep itself; waking a little, I pray, half dreaming, that the rain will not cease by morning, and that, going outside, I may find our lane standing under water, with not one step of the bathing-ghat left showing.

But looking back to the period of which I am now speaking, I find that autumn had, by then, claimed the throne. Life, in those days, unfolds against a vast, translucent stretch of Ashwin sky; I remember, over the dew-bright, tender green, in the melting gold of the sun, standing on the southern veranda, composing a tune, humming it softly to myself — that on an autumn morning:

Today, in autumn's warmth, in the dream of dawn,

I know not what my heart desires.

The day wears on — the house-clock strikes noon — the whole mind lies steeped in the mood of some midday air, giving no ear whatever to the claims of work; that too belonged to autumn —

Idling, idling, the whole day through,
what game is this I play, all to myself.

I remember, one such noon, sitting in the corner room upon its spread carpet, sketching in a drawing-book. It was no rigorous discipline of art — only play, all to myself, with the mere wish to draw. Whatever remained locked within the mind, whatever could never quite be drawn at all, was in fact its truest portion. And meanwhile that golden, idle intoxication of an autumn noon seeped through the very walls, filling to the brim that one small, ordinary room in the city of Calcutta. I do not know why, but the sky and the light in which I now see those days of my life are the sky and light of autumn. As it is, for the farmer, the autumn of ripening paddy, so it is for me the autumn of ripening song — the autumn of all my sunlit, brimming leisure, the autumn of drawing pictures and spinning idle tales, in a mind unbound, filled with causeless delight.

Between that childhood rainy season and this autumn of youth, I notice this difference: in the days of rain, Nature without stood pressing close about me, greeting me with all her pomp of leaf and cloud, her music and her instruments in full array. But the festival of this autumn has its source in man himself. Leaving the mere play of cloud and sunshine behind, the stir of joy and sorrow begins to murmur within; upon the blue sky man's unblinking gaze lays a colour of its own, and with the very wind itself the sighing of man's heart's desire seems to breathe.

My poetry has now come and stands at the threshold of humankind. Here, of course, there is no unrestricted entry; hall opens beyond hall, and door beyond door. Standing in the road, seeing only that fragment of lamplight glimmering within some lattice, how many times must one turn back; the distant strain of the shehnai's evening raga reaches the ear only faintly, from the great gate of the palace. There is a settling of accounts between mind and mind, a bargaining of will with will, so much given and so much taken through every crooked obstacle. Beating again and again against these very obstacles, the perennial stream of life goes foaming into laughter and tears, dancing on; at every step it whirls about in eddies, and no sure reckoning of its course can ever be had.

Kori o Komol — Sharps and Flats — stands singing there, at that very threshold before the house of human life. And in order to enter that hall of mystery and win a seat within, it offers, at the very gate, this petition —

I do not wish to die in this beautiful world,
I wish to live among mankind.

This is the small life's offering of itself at the feet of the universal life.

SHRI ASHUTOSH CHOWDHURY

When I set out, the second time, upon my voyage to England, it was aboard ship that I first came to know Ashu. He had taken his M.A. at Calcutta University and was going on to Cambridge to read for the bar. Between Calcutta and Madras we were together on board for only a few days. But it turned out that depth of acquaintance does not depend upon the number of days. Through a simple warmth of heart he took possession of my mind, in so short a space, that whatever gap of unfamiliarity had lain between us before seemed, within those few days, filled up from end to end.

When Ashu returned from England our families became bound in kinship. He had not yet entered the labyrinth of a barrister's practice, nor lost himself, like salt dissolved in water, within the law. The pleated purse-strings of his clients had not yet burst open their treasury of gold, and he was still glowing with the enthusiasm of one newly returned from the honeyed groves of literature. I found, in those days, that literary feeling had come to pervade his whole nature entirely. In the breeze of letters that stirred within his mind there was not the least trace of the smell of morocco leather from a library shelf. In that breeze mingled the breath of many an unfamiliar flower from bowers beyond the sea, and through converse with him we seemed to set out, as it were, for some woodland festival of spring in a far and unknown country.

He had a particular delight in the savour of French poetry. I was writing, at that time, the poems of Kori o Komol. In some of these he found an echo of the temper of certain French poets. It seemed to him that the very idea — that the strange and varied drama of human passion draws the poet's mind wholly to itself — found expression, in manifold ways, throughout the poems of Kori o Komol. A restless, unfulfilled longing to enter fully into this life, and to embrace it on every side, is the underlying theme of these verses.

Ashu said, "I myself shall arrange these poems of yours in fitting order and bring them into print." The task of publication was placed in his hands. "I do not wish to die in this beautiful world" — this sonnet he himself set at the very head of the volume. In his view, the essence of the whole book lay within this single poem.

Nor is this unreasonable. In childhood, shut up within the house, I had opened my heart, with eager eyes, toward the strange world outside, through a crevice in the wall of the inner apartments' roof. At the dawn of youth, the world of human life drew me in just the same way. There too I had no entry; I stood only upon the shore. The ferry-boat, sail hoisted, cut its way across the waves; and I, standing on the bank, seemed to stretch my hand toward its rudder and call out to it. Life — it longs to break forth into the very journey of life.

SHARPS AND FLATS

It would not be true to say that I felt this pain of longing to leap into the very midst of life merely because some peculiarity of my social station stood in my way. There is no sign that those of our countrymen who lie right at the centre of society feel, on every side, any powerful surge of life's own force. There are embankments enough, and bathing-ghats enough; upon the dark water the cool shadow of ancient, great trees has settled; hidden deep in moist foliage, the cuckoo calls in its old, familiar fifth note — but this, after all, is no more than a walled pond. Where is the current here, where the wave, from what quarter does the tide come roaring up from the sea? The free stream of human life, breaking through rock, shouting its cry of victory, rising wave upon wave toward its ocean-voyage — can it be that the very roar of that tide was reaching my ears from the society just across my lane? It was not so. Wherever the true source of life wells up, it is there that the solitary heart, shut up in its lonely room, weeps for an invitation to its abundant joys and sorrows.

In that mild inertia where mankind does nothing but nod and doze through its midday languor, human life, being of itself denied its full expression, comes to be wrapped about with a kind of torpor. To break free of the weight of that torpor I have felt pain my whole life through. In those days the lifeless political meetings and newspaper agitations then in fashion, the mild intoxication of a patriotism ignorant of the country it professed to love and averse to any true service of it, which had crept into the educated classes — none of this could win my heart's assent. A great impatience, a great dissatisfaction with myself and with all that surrounded me, would trouble and disturb me; my heart would cry out, "Better, oh, to have been some wandering Bedouin than this!"

At the coming of the Goddess of Joy
joy has gone abroad, flooding the land—
behold, there, at the rich man's gate,

stands a beggar-girl.

This, indeed, is my own very story. In those societies where the festival of a wealthy, free life resounds like a wedding-trumpet, where the coming and going of guests knows no end, we stand only at the outer gate, gazing in with covetous eyes — never dressed and ready to enter and join the throng.

This unsatisfied longing to realize, in rich and varied form, within one's own life, the vast life of humanity, is possible only in that very country where all things lie severed and cut off, each confined within its own small, artificial bounds. Sitting within that chalk-circle drawn by my own servant, just as I once longed, in fancy, for the wide world's open playground, so too, in the days of my youth, my secluded heart, with the very same sorrow, stretched out its hand toward the vast heart-world of humanity. That it is rare, that it is hard to reach, distant — this I know. But if I cannot forge, with it, some bond of living force; if no wind blows from that quarter, no current flows, no unbroken traffic of travellers passes along that road — then whatever is decayed simply lies athwart the path of the new, and the wreckage of death is cleared away by none, but only piles itself, ever heavier, upon life, smothering it.

In the days of the rains there is nothing but dense cloud and downpour. In the days of autumn there is a play of cloud and sunshine, yet it does not shroud the sky entire — and meanwhile, even as one watches, the harvest ripens in the fields. So too, when my poetic world lay in its monsoon season, there was only the vapour, the wind, and the downpour of feeling; then rhythm ran wild and its utterance stood unclear. But in the Kori o Komol of autumn, it is no longer merely the colour of clouds against the sky — there, upon the earth itself, a harvest has begun to show. This time the rhythm and language of dealing with the real, working world strive to take shape in manifold forms.

And now one chapter has come to its close. In life, henceforward, the days of meeting between home and world, between the inward and the outward, draw steadily nearer together. From this point on, life's journey, leaving the safety of the shore, must pass through the very midst of the world of men, into every bond of good and ill, of joy and sorrow — and this can no longer be shown lightly, as though it were merely a picture. Here there is so much building up and pulling down, so much victory and defeat, so much conflict and reconciliation. Through all these obstacles, oppositions, and windings, I have no power to lay bare and display that innermost purpose toward which the Lord of my Life has, with such joyous skill, been leading me on. If that wondrous, supreme mystery itself cannot be shown, then whatever else I might attempt to show would, at every turn, only lead to misunderstanding. Analyse a statue, and you find nothing but clay — never the sculptor's joy. And so, having come as far as the threshold of the innermost chamber, it is here that I take my leave of the readers of these, my Reminiscences.