ESSAY

THE FORM AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE ASHRAM

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THE FORM AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE ASHRAM -1

It is impossible today to form any clear conception of what the tapovana—the forest hermitage—of ancient India was in actual, concrete terms. The most we can surmise is this: that those whom we call rishis and sages had their forest retreats as places of spiritual practice, and that alongside this, they maintained their households with wives and kin. In these hermitages there was considerable ferment of desire, anger, passion, and enmity—the Puranic tales bear ample witness to this.

Yet the image of the tapovana that has endured, fixed forever in the mind and literature of later India, is one of a pure and beautiful vision of blessedness—an image of vigorous joy, untouched by luxury or sensual indulgence. Out of the confused, turbid, and incomplete materials of immediate surroundings, the longing for deliverance created this realm of desire, drawing upon the dim fragments of historical memory.

In later times, amid the sorrows of poets, one seems to catch an intimation of a nationwide grief of exile; in Kalidasa's Raghuvamsha this finds unmistakable expression. That exile was a banishment from the sparse materials of the tranquil, beautiful age of the tapovana into a darker age entangled in the nets of worldly opulence.

Kalidasa lived long ago, yet this image has remained alive in my own mind as well. In my youth I lived in solitude on the banks of the Padma, devoted to literary pursuits. In the midst of my literary labors, at some point, the call of that tapovana came and reached my heart. The tapovana, formless and without particular attachment, sought to take shape from me in some field congenial to the modern age. The same inspiration that drives one to compose poetry was present here too—not merely as a verbal image, but as something to be directly realized.

With great sorrow this thought arose in my mind: that the machine men have built for making boys into men, called the school, cannot possibly bring human children to the fullness of education. For this education, an ashram is needed—a place where the living presence of the whole of life plays its part.

At the centre of the tapovana stands the guru. He is not a machine, but a man—not passively a man, but actively so, for he strives toward the very goal of humanity itself. That in this flowing current of austerity the disciples' hearts are quickened into motion is itself part of the guru's own striving. Whatever inspiration the disciples' lives receive, they receive it from his unmediated presence. This presence of an ever-wakeful human consciousness is the most precious element in the education of the ashram—not the subject of instruction, not the method, not the materials. Because the guru's mind, gaining itself anew in every moment, gives itself. The joy of giving proves its own truth in the joy of receiving—just as the true mark of genuine wealth lies in the naturalness of its renunciation.

In modern times, machine production has been introduced for the sake of making the manufacture of goods vast and swift. Manufactured goods are not living things; they suffer nothing under the pressure of the hydraulic press. But the business of education, through the mechanical effort of mass production, cannot but oppress the human mind with its dry, impersonal method. It must be accepted as certain that the education of the ashram cannot become the machine-house of that kind of education. Here, upon the mind of every student, there must remain the living touch of the teacher's own being—and in that lies joy for both sides.

Once I stayed in the house of a Japanese gentleman who had a particular fondness for gardening. He said: "I am a Buddhist, a follower of maitri—loving-kindness. I love trees and plants; into them enters this feeling of love from me, and from them I receive that very love in return." With a merely skilled gardener, this spontaneous joy of communion with nature does not occur. Needless to say, this holds true with even greater certainty in the case of human gardeners of human souls. When mind meets mind, joy awakens of itself. That joy is creative and vital. The teaching given in an ashram is the gift of this joy. Those who possess a sense of duty but lack this joy have taken the second-best path.

THE FORM AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE ASHRAM -2

I used to live in solitude at Shilaidaha on the banks of the Padma, absorbed in literary work. With a resolve toward creation, I came from there to the outskirts of Shantiniketan.

The ashram's grounds were small then. Along its southern boundary stood a long row of sal trees. An arbour of madhavi-creeper marked the entrance. Behind, to the east, was a mango grove; to the west, here a palm, there a jackfruit tree, here a jujube, and scattered coconut palms. At the northwestern edge stood two ancient chatim trees, and beneath their shade an unadorned platform paved with marble. Before it there was no screen of trees—an open field stretched to the horizon, a field then untouched by the plough. To the north, amid a grove of mango trees, stood a two-storied guesthouse for visitors, with its adjoining kitchen in the shade of an old kadam tree. There was only one other pucca building, single-storied, containing an old bound copy of the Tattvabodhini and a small collection of other books. This building was later enlarged and a second story added to house what is now the library. Beyond the ashram's boundary, to the south, there was then a wide embankment full of water. Along its high northern bank stood an ancient long row of palmyra palms, visible from the ashram without obstruction. Along the ashram's eastern boundary ran the shadeless red-earth road leading toward Bolpur. There was little traffic on that road, for the town had not yet grown crowded; there were few houses there. The smoke of rice mills had not yet begun to pollute the sky with darkness and disease. All around reigned a vast, silent, and boundless leisure.

The guardian of the ashram was old Dhari Sardar, tall and long of limb. In his hand he carried a long staff of seasoned bamboo—the last vestige of a youth spent in banditry. The gardener was Harish, the Sardar's son. Dwijendranath lived on the ground floor of the guesthouse with a few attendants and companions. My wife and I took up residence in the room upstairs.

In this tranquil, sparsely peopled grove of sal trees, with the help of Brahmabandhav Upadhyay, I began the work of the school with a handful of boys. My place for teaching was under the old jam tree.

No fees were taken from the boys; whatever they needed, I supplied myself entirely. I had forgotten one thing: that in ancient times, a sixth part of the state's revenue was allotted to the tapovana, and that the modern institution of the chatuspathi rests upon the socially recurring flow of gifts on ceremonial occasions. That is to say, these are integral parts of society itself; no separate individual effort was needed to sustain their existence. My ashram, however, depended solely on my own meagre resources. The belief that no financial transaction ought to exist between guru and disciple was once true in an era when society naturally supported such a relationship; but I learned through much suffering, over many years, that when one tries to preserve such an ideal in a society where it is no longer the accepted custom, the very self-preservation of the one who bears this responsibility becomes nearly impossible. I had the good fortune that Brahmabandhav and his Christian disciple Revachand were both sannyasis. Because of this, the financial and administrative burden of teaching was lightened by them. Among all these, there is one man whose memory rises above all others—one I can never forget. Let me begin from the beginning.

At this time, two young men—hardly more than boys—came to me. Ajitkumar Chakravarty brought his friend, the poet Satishchandra Ray, to our house at Jorasanko, into my ground-floor sitting room. Satish was then nineteen, with his B.A. examination approaching. Before this, he had given me a notebook of his poems to read. I had to explain my opinion, page by page, in detail. Not all of it was favourable. With anyone else, I would not have engaged in such an elaborate critique. Reading Satish's work, I understood that an unusual quality lay dimly present in this young man's writing. His capacity was beyond doubt; to dismiss him with a few pleasant words would have been to insult him. My opinion, in the parts that were unfavourable, distressed Ajit, but Satish, gentle and composed, accepted it graciously.

In my mind at that time, the resolve regarding the ashram was ever alive and vocal. In the course of conversation, I painted for them, with enthusiasm, a bright picture

of its future. A radiance appeared on Satish's face. I did not invite him to join my work. I knew that before him lay still two great steps up to the university, the final rung of which held the promise of livelihood—the study of law.

One day Satish came and said, "If you will accept me, I wish to join your work." I said, "Take your examination first, and think about it afterward." Satish said, "I will not sit for the examination. For if I pass, the pressure of my relatives will roll me down the easy slope of worldly life."

Nothing could dissuade him. Taking upon his shoulders the burden of poverty with utter indifference, he joined the work of the ashram. He refused any salary. Without his knowledge, I sent as much monthly allowance as I could to his father. He wore no proper shirt, only a worn and threadbare shawl about his body. In whatever realm of imagination he wandered, his life was, in every moment, filled from the treasure-house of nature's essence. A man lost in himself, he would wander here and there at any hour. The boys were mostly with him; walking along, they too tasted the flavour of his literary communion. Such profound absorption in English literature, at so young an age, I have found in no one else. The students placed in his charge were utterly rudimentary. His task was merely to lead them through the lowest rungs of the English language ladder, but there was no narrow, cramped skill confined to petty limits in his teaching. He was a connoisseur, a true master of literary taste, and so whatever lesson he gave was not meant to be memorized but absorbed—it became food for the boys' minds. He gave them a space in which to immerse themselves, a depth far exceeding what was necessary. In language teaching there is always an inevitable element of discipline; that discipline he could transcend through the generous freedom of literature. Within a year, his death occurred. That grief remains with me still. Those who would become teachers in the ashram would be, above all, seekers—this vision of mine was made wholly true in Satish.

After him, in the next phase, came Jagadananda. My acquaintance with him began through reading his scientific essays sent to Sadhana magazine. The lucid language and coherent argumentation of these essays drew my particular admiration toward him. To relieve his domestic difficulties, I first employed him in the work of our zamindari estate. The chief reason was that the estate office was not stingy with

wages. But it began to pain me to keep him confined to a post so unsuited to him. I invited him to the teaching work at Shantiniketan. Although the income from this work was small, the measure of joy it brought him was abundant. The reason was that in teaching, there was an unfeigned contentment natural to his temperament. Toward his students he was utterly without stint in self-giving. He held deep compassion for the boys. Even in matters of punishment, he could not bear the slightest cruelty toward them. Once, a teacher had confined a student to his room and denied him a meal as punishment. I have seen him weep at the cruelty of this disciplinary measure. His storehouse of scientific knowledge was open to his students, even though it did not fall within their prescribed syllabus. This unstinting self-giving is the true mark of a true teacher. He never kept his position remote from his students. In his effort to preserve the dignity and independence of his office, he never drew a line at serving his pupils. The high authority of his professorship was never made overly apparent beneath the veil of his gentle manner. In truth, in all matters he was a companion to the boys. In his mathematics class, if any student, however slightly, fell behind and failed an examination, it wounded him deeply. His effort to uphold the high ideal of education was tireless. His stern reproach toward inattentive boys was fearsome to hear, but his affection would silently protest against his own scolding from within—and the students felt this every day. Among the teachers who dedicated themselves wholly to the creative work of the ashram, Jagadananda stood foremost. The ashram can never forget his absence, nor the grief of it.

Satish's friend Ajitkumar occupied a high place among true teachers. His learning was vast in English literature and philosophy. In this realm of knowledge, he had been a student of Brajendranath Seal. He too, without reservation, opened to his students the treasury of his knowledge. His pupils always had, from his teaching, the opportunity to taste literary flavours of a higher order. Though their age was young and their capacity limited, he was never indifferent to them out of pride in his own position. He did not share Satish's indifference to poverty, yet he too accepted it. That he was a skilled architect in the work of building our ashram, there is no doubt.

In the interim, for a very brief time, came my self-sacrificing friend Mohitchandra Sen. He had been associated with the higher division of the university. Abandoning

entirely the fame and prestige of that position, he joined this humbler level of education, which from the standpoint of public recognition was unworthy of him. But in this he found abundant joy, for teaching was natural to his temperament. Within a short time his death occurred, and his vow of teaching came to an untimely end. He was unstinting both materially and spiritually. On the very first day I met him, the respect he expressed for the ideals of the ashram was sufficient for my joy. Finally, at the time of taking leave, he said, "If I could join your work here, I would consider myself blessed. But since that is not possible at present, please accept this small token of my reverence." So saying, he placed a paper packet in my hand and departed. Later, when I opened it, I found a thousand-rupee note inside. Whatever he had earned as an examiner, he gave away entirely as a token of his reverence. But it was not merely that one day's gift; from then on, he dedicated, every single day, his reverential offering in the wholly inadequate form of salary.

Long after these, Nandalal appeared in the field of the ashram's endeavour. This gifted artist's oneness with all the students, young and old alike, was most remarkable. His self-giving was not confined merely to teaching, but extended to every form of generosity. In the students' illness, grief, and want, he was their unfeigned friend. Those who came to know him through the occasion of art instruction counted themselves blessed.

After these, many workers, many friends, gathered in the field of the ashram's endeavour, and each, according to the particular strength and nature of their own being, contributed diverse materials to the ongoing work of the ashram's construction. In creative work, this diversity is necessary. Under the inspiration of ever-new times, ever-new forms come to express themselves, and only by this means, preserving harmony with the age, is the work able to keep its strength unimpaired. Only through fidelity to this changing ideal does the creation of the new age achieve completeness upon the foundation of the old age. There is no use in lamenting this. Indeed, if one fears the melody of the new age within the rhythm of the old, the coherence of creation cannot be preserved.

Ashadh, 1348

THE FORM AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE ASHRAM-3

I have written in Jivansmriti that when I was young, the manners and customs of the school, and the conduct of teachers and students, became utterly unbearable to me. There was no savour whatsoever in the discipline of education in those days—but that alone was not the sole cause of my impatience. In the city of Calcutta, I lived in a state of near captivity. Yet even at home, within the crevices of confinement, a joyful bond with the outer world of nature had grown up within me. In the pond to the south of our house, the shadows of morning and evening would drift from one bank to the other—ducks would swim there, snails would dive and vanish in the water; in Ashadh, the sky filled with blue-black clouds massed row upon row above the coconut trees, gathering the deep chorus of the coming monsoon. In the garden that lay to the south, season after season, invitations of many colours would come along the path of eager sight into my heart.

This primeval bond between the life of the child and the vast life of nature—how great a value it holds for the unfolding of soul and mind—I hope even the most confirmed city-dweller need not be told. When school was but dry lessons, and the relentless discipline and the unrestrained, unjust cruelty of teachers who loved dominion had smothered that very diversity of the boy's communion with the world, rendering his days lifeless, lightless, and harsh—then, in helpless anguish, a futile rebellion arose in my mind, utterly restless. When I was thirteen, I broke the chain of the education department's tether and escaped. After that, whatever institution I entered could truly be called a university. There I had no holiday, for I had found leisure in the midst of ceaseless work. Some days I read until two in the morning. In that age of dim lighting, the whole neighbourhood lay silent at night, and now and then one heard the cry of "Haribol" from the throats of funeral processions. In the lamp fed by castor oil, with its double wick, I would sometimes extinguish one wick, which would diminish the brightness of the flame but increase its duration. Sometimes my elder sister-in-law would come from the inner apartments and forcibly seize my book, sending me off to bed. In those days, whatever books I tried to read, some elder, seeing them in my hand, thought it presumption. Once I emerged from the prison of education and gained education's freedom, my work increased greatly, yet the burden lessened.

After this I entered household life. The problem of educating Rathindranath came before me. Had I sent him to school according to the prevailing custom then, my responsibility would have been lightened, and that is exactly what my relatives expected. But to send him to an institution cut off from the wide world of nature was, for me, impossible. My conviction was that, at least at the beginning of life, urban living is not conducive to the nourishment of vitality and the first flowering of the mind. Separation from the inspiration of nature's world was not its only cause. In the city, there exist various conveniences of transportation and other aspects of daily life, which deprive children of complete physical exercise and direct experience of their surroundings; children become, from childhood, permanently dependent on external things for support. Garden trees that receive the privilege of watering from above cling only to the surface soil; they never learn to strike roots deep into the earth and live independently. It is much the same with human beings. The education that nature demands of us—the education of using the body fully and properly—is neglected, held in contempt, by the manners of the urban "respectable" class; the want and sorrow of this I feel in my life even to this day. So, at that time, I nearly abandoned the city of Calcutta altogether. Then I lived with my family at Shilaidaha. There, our manner of living was utterly simple. This was possible because, in the society into which we were born, the customs and ideals of prevailing life could not reach that far; even the urban middle-class people of that day, accustomed to certain comforts and pretensions, lived far removed from us. In great cities, habits inevitably form through mutual imitation and competition; there was not even the possibility of that here.

In the close proximity of nature at Shilaidaha, Rathindranath gained a freedom that the well-to-do householders of that time considered unsuitable for the children of their own households, fearing the dangers they knew such freedom entailed. Rathi, at that age, rowed a dinghy on the river. In that boat, he would bring down rotis daily from the passing steamer, over which the steamer's sarang lodged repeated complaints. He would go out hunting in the reed-beds and wild growth of the char-lands—sometimes not returning until late afternoon, the whole day gone. That there was no anxiety at home over this, I cannot say, but that anxiety never curtailed the boy's independent movement for the sake of our own peace of mind. When Rathi was under sixteen, I sent him with a few pilgrims on foot to Kedarnath,

for which I endured rebuke from my relatives; but the experience of tolerance toward hardship that I deemed the essential purpose of education—on the one hand in the field of nature, on the other in relation to the common people of the country—I did not, out of the timidity of affection, deprive him of it.

Around the homestead at Shilaidaha, I engaged in various experiments on the land, in the manner of the times, with the aim of spreading new crops. In this experimental venture, assistance from government agricultural specialists came in considerable measure. Seeing the list of materials they had sent, farmers who had never passed through any Agricultural College at Cirencester laughed heartily; their laughter persisted to the very end. As devoted patients follow every instruction of their physician even when the fear of death is imminent, so I followed the directives of the government agricultural experts with utter fidelity in the experiment of planting potatoes on fifty bighas of land. They too, to keep my hopes alive, visited regularly on inspection duties. My friend Jagadish still occasionally laughs about the farce of that vast and costly failure. But an even greater silent laughter had resounded in the home of that one-handed Rajbanshi farmer nicknamed Chamru, who, taking the seed suited to five kathas of land and disregarding all the advice of the agricultural experts, achieved a far more abundant yield than I. Among the experiments in farming through which the boy grew up, this story was told to give a sample of one such episode; let readers laugh if they wish, but let them also accept that even this failure, as part of education, was not itself a failure. The value of the extraordinary blunder into which I fell in this vast and strange misadventure—there was no opportunity to make Chamru understand its worth; he is now in the other world.

Besides this, that there was arrangement for book-learning too goes without saying. A certain eccentric, dissolute English teacher suddenly appeared. His method of teaching was very good—better still, that shirking his duties was not in his nature. From time to time, in an uncontrollable urge for drink, he would flee to Calcutta, and afterward return hanging his head, ashamed and repentant. But never at Shilaidaha, in a state of drunken self-forgetfulness, did he do anything to lose the students' respect. He could not understand the servants' language; often he took this to be the servants' own rudeness. Besides this, he would never call my old Muslim servant by his hereditary name, Fatik; he addressed him, for no reason,

as Suleman. What psychological mystery lay behind this, I do not know. This caused repeated inconvenience, for that servant of the farmhouse would invariably forget the dignity of this unfamiliar name.

There is something else to relate. Lawrence became possessed by a mania for silk cultivation. Kumarkhali, near Shilaidaha, had been, during the East India Company's regime, a chief centre of the silk trade. The distinctiveness of silk from there had gained fame in foreign markets. There stood a vast, great silk factory. Once the looms of silk fell silent throughout Bengal, and, steeped in the dream of past memory, the factory stood empty and desolate. When the enormous burden of my paternal debts pressed upon my father's household, at some point he sold this factory to the Railway Company. At that time, a bridge was being built over the Gorai river. Breaking up the abundant brick and stone of this old-world palace, that Company sacrificed them into the river to check the river's force. But just as no one could stem the ruin of Bengal's weavers in their dark days, just as nothing could check the destruction of my grandfather's vast wealth through domestic misfortune—so too the river's erosion would not be checked by the ruined remains of the factory; everything was swept away. Whatever traces of prosperous times the flow of time had spared, the river's current carried them off as well.

News of this history of silk reached Lawrence's ears. It occurred to him that if the attempt were renewed once more, profit might yet be found; even if the loss proved very great, it would not exceed the loss from potato cultivation. Writing letters, he duly gathered information from the experts. To feed the worms, castor-oil trees were needed. Some trees were quickly planted, but Lawrence's patience did not last. Silkworm eggs were brought in from Rajshahi, and rearing began at once. At first, he did not treat the experts' words as gospel; he proceeded, testing new methods of his own. The worms' mouths were tiny, their bites tiny, but their hunger had no end. Their numbers began to multiply, breaking the limited provisions of food. From far and near, an unceasing supply of leaves went on continuously. Lawrence's bedding, his table and chair, his notebooks and books, his cap, pocket, and coat—everywhere the worms swarmed. His room became foul, wrapped in a thick miasma of stench. After considerable expense and tireless labour, a great quantity of thread was produced; the experts said it was excellent—silk of such whiteness this region did not usually produce. Success stood plainly

visible—only one small flaw remained. Lawrence, checking the market, learned that in those days the demand for this material was scant, and its price negligible. The ceaseless coming and going of carts carrying castor leaves ceased; the cocoon-filled baskets lay abandoned for many days. What became of them afterward, no record exists anywhere today.

In that era, in the land of Bengal, the emergence of these silkworms occurred at the wrong time. But the school I had opened kept faith with its own proper time.

Our pandit was Shibadhan Vidyarnab. Teaching Bengali and Sanskrit was his task, and he would explain and recite verses from the Upanishads out of the Brahmo scripture-book. My father held special favour toward him for his pure Sanskrit pronunciation. The ideal of ancient India's tapovana that had lived in my mind since childhood had thus begun in this manner, but its form did not take proper shape from adequate materials.

For a long time, the theory that lived actively in my mind regarding education, taken as a whole, was this: education should be an intimate part of daily life, moving with it in one rhythm, one melody; it should not be a thing confined to the cage of the classroom. And the world of nature, which continually, directly and indirectly, spreads education through our body and mind—that too should be joined with it. One aspect of nature's schooling is observation, another is experiment, and greatest of all is the sowing of joy into the heart of life. This concerns the outer nature. And there is also the inner nature of a country, with its own particular flavour, colour, and resonance. The eternal spirit of India finds its shelter in the Sanskrit language. Through the sacred path of this language, we would touch the ancient nature of our land's mind, and take it within ourselves—this was firmly fixed in my mind as the goal of education. Through the medium of the English language we can learn many valuable subjects; these are extremely necessary. But the Sanskrit language possesses a joy that colours the sky of our mind; within it lies a profound utterance, which, like the vast world of nature itself, gives us peace and lends dignity to thought.

Here lies the foundation of the theory of education that I revere. This required considerable courage, for its path was unaccustomed and its final outcome

untested. I did not have the power to steer this education through to its final destination, but my devotion to it has never wavered. It found support nowhere in the country. There is a story about this. On one side, in forest dwelling, the country's awakened world of nature; on the other, in the household of the guru, the country's purest and highest culture—in the intimate contact of these two, the education that once flowed in the tapovana under a certain discipline—my reverence for this I once explained in some lecture. I said, doubtless the materials of education must be greatly increased in modern times, but its form and its essence would be shaped through nature's cooperation, and he who bestows education would do so through his own intimate spiritual communion. Hearing this, the venerable Gurudas Bandopadhyay had said that this statement was poetically conceived; a poet may imagine its necessity, but it cannot be accepted in the modern age to the extent he imagines. In reply, I said to him: the world of nature does not sit before a desk in class and play schoolmaster, but opening her class in water, in earth, in sky, with what tremendous power she shapes our minds—can any schoolmaster do the same? Did not the desert of Arabia itself shape the man of Arabia—had that same man been born in a land richly diverse in fruits and crops along the banks of the blue river, would his nature not have been altogether different? That nature which is vivid and diverse, and that city which is lifeless and paved with stone—the difference in their influence upon the formation of mind is beyond doubt immense.

I know this for certain: had I, from childhood, remained confined mostly to the city, its influence would have shown itself abundantly in my thought and in my writing. Whether this could be specifically demonstrated through learning and intellect, I do not know, but the temperament formed would have been of a different kind. To the extent that I was continually deprived of the world's unbidden gifts, to that same extent my nature would have remained poor in the wealth of gratitude owed to the world in return. Since such an intimate matter carries no market value, its absence is felt only by that inner witness who dwells within, watching over the fortunate wretch who remains, untouched by grief, unaware of his own poverty. However accomplished he may be in the business of living, in the fulfilment of human birth he remains forever unfulfilled.

That very day I first thought that mere words would not suffice, for such ideas run against the habits of this age. This thought had merely stirred within my mind; it received no support anywhere in the country. There is a proof of this. On one side, forest-dwelling brought the awakened world of nature; on the other, dwelling in the guru's household brought the purest, highest culture of the land—in the intimate meeting of these two, once, in the tapovana, education flowed by a certain discipline, and I explained my reverence for this in some lecture. I said that in the modern age the materials of education must undoubtedly be increased, but its form, its essence, would be crafted with nature's cooperation, and the one who imparts education would do so through his own intimate spiritual fellowship. Hearing this, Gurudas Bandopadhyay had remarked that this was a poet's conceit; what the poet imagines as necessary cannot, in the modern age, be accepted to that degree. I answered him that the world of nature does not sit before a desk in a classroom and play teacher, but by opening her classroom in water, in earth, in sky, with what tremendous power she shapes our minds—can any schoolmaster achieve the same? Did not the desert itself shape the man of Arabia? Had that very man been born instead in a land of wondrous fruits and crops along blue riverbanks, would his nature not have been utterly different? That nature which is living and various, and that city which is lifeless and built of stone—between their influence upon the formation of character, the difference is beyond all doubt immense.

That very day I first thought that words alone would not suffice, because such ideas ran contrary to the habits of the present age. This thought merely stirred within my mind and found support nowhere in the country. I would need to give it as much reality as I could by building it in the field of action. Outward imitation of the tapovana, one might say, is to be rejected, for in the present day it would be incongruous, false. Its inner truth must be established within the framework of modern life.

Some time before this, Shantiniketan Ashram had been dedicated by my father to the public. It was his intention that, by observing certain rules, visitors might, for two or three days, seek spiritual peace there. For this purpose, the place of worship, the library, and other arrangements were duly established. Occasionally, some

would come there for that very purpose, but most came to spend a holiday and, with the help of a change of air, to seek bodily recovery.

I was young when I went travelling with my father. Leaving home, that was my first journey abroad. From the confinement of brick and mortar into the vast freedom of the open sky—this I experienced for the first time. To say "first" is not entirely accurate. Before this, once in Calcutta, when dengue fever had become epidemic, I had taken refuge with my elders in the garden of the Talababus by the Ganges. On the open expanse of that vast earth, at one edge of a far-reaching lawn, my seat had been arranged that day. All day, releasing my mind into that vastness, my wonder and joy knew no fatigue. But even then I remained bound by our former household rule—wandering unrestrained was forbidden. That is, in Calcutta I was a caged bird confined in a locked cage—not merely restricted in movement, but restricted even in the freedom of sight; here I remained a perched bird, the sky open on every side, yet a chain upon my foot. At Shantiniketan, I experienced for the first time in my life complete release amid the world of nature. I came here right after my sacred thread ceremony. The initiation I had received from my father, to expand consciousness into the realm from earth to heaven during the thread ceremony—that same initiation I received here from the deity of the universe. My life would have remained utterly incomplete had I not had this opportunity in my early years. My father hedged me about with no prohibition or discipline. In the morning, for a short while, I would study English and Sanskrit with him; after that, my time was unrestricted leisure. Bolpur town had not yet swollen. The smoke of rice mills had not yet fouled the sky, nor had its stench yet burdened the gentle breeze. The red-earth road running across the middle of the field had little traffic upon it. The waters of the embankment lay full and spread wide; the silt-laden fields of farming had not encroached upon it from every side. Along its western high bank stood, unbroken, a row of dense palm trees. What we called the khoyai—that is, the winding, uneven, eroded paths cut by monsoon streams through the gravel soil—was strewn with stones of many kinds and shapes: some like flakes with sheared edges, some like long fibrous pieces of wood, some arranged like grains of crystal, some smooth as though fire-melted. I remember that after the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, a French soldier had taken refuge in our house; that Frenchman cooked French food for us and taught my elder brothers and their French language. Once, when my brothers came to Bolpur, he was with them.

Carrying a small hammer and a pouch slung at his waist, he would search this khoyai for rare stones. One day he found a large piece of rock crystal, which, having it set like a ring, he sold to some wealthy man in Calcutta for eighty rupees. I too, throughout many an entire afternoon, would enter the khoyai and gather various stones—not out of greed for wealth, but purely to acquire stones. Where the field's water seeped through, at one spot in this khoyai, a small waterfall would fall from the higher ground above. There had collected a small pool, its pale, turbid water deep enough for me to dive and bathe. Overflowing this pool, a thin, clear stream of water would ripple along through many branching channels, small fish swimming upstream against that current. I would follow the water's edge, discovering ever-new infant river-valleys of that miniature world. Here and there, holes could be found in the surface of the bank. Concealing myself within them, I would feel the pride of an explorer amid an unknown geography. In places within the khoyai where soil had gathered, short wild date palms grew here and there, and in places dense reed grass had grown tall. Above, in the distant field, cattle grazed; Santhals ploughed here and there, and along the pathless expanse, bullock carts creaked past with plaintive cries—but within the hollow of this khoyai, no living creature stirred. This secluded world of shadow and sunlight, of varied red gravel, bore neither fruit nor flower nor crop; here dwelt no nest of bird or beast; here one saw only what seemed like the whimsical sketch of some artist-creator drawn without reason, of odd and random shapes; above, the cloudless blue sky pale in the sun's glare, and below, the red gravel's colour laid out in thick strokes of countless crooked, uneven, strange lines—nothing here betrayed anything but the Creator's own childlike play. With the child's play itself lay the rhythm of this creation's composition; its hills, its rivers, its ponds, its caves and hollows, all were measured to the scale of a child's mind. Here, alone, lost in my own thoughts, I passed many an hour; no one asked an account of my work, to no one was I answerable for my time. Now that khoyai no longer wears that face. Year after year, the material used for road repairs has been scraped away from it, leaving it bare and impoverished; its variety, its natural beauty, has vanished.

At that time, Shantiniketan held yet another thing of romantic, that is, of story-like flavour. The old man who was the watchman of this garden had once, in his day, been the leader of a band of dacoits. He was then old, his frame tall, with scarcely any flesh left upon it, dark-complexioned, with sharp, piercing eyes, a long bamboo

staff in hand, his voice cracked and hoarse. As everyone likely knows, the ancient twin chatim trees now enveloped by malati creepers at Shantiniketan were, in that earlier time, the only two trees standing in the midst of that vast field. Beneath those very trees had been the dacoits' den. Many an exhausted traveller, seeking the shade of that chatim grove, had lost either wealth or life there, in the days of that weak state governance. This old man was known as the last surviving remnant of that final chapter of dacoit history. That in this land of Tantric worshippers of the dark goddess, the skull-cup of Mother Kali was never fed with human blood, I do not believe. In connection with the ashram, I once heard a rumour reach my ears about some red-eyed, vermilion-marked so-called respectable Shakta whom people believed to have partaken of human flesh as sacred offering.

Once, guided by the shade of merely these two chatim trees, distant travellers would come here in hope of rest. My father too, once, returning by palanquin from a dinner invitation at the house of Bhuban Singh of Raipur, felt, in the middle of the field, the call of these two trees reach his heart. Here, in the hope of peace, he accepted this land as a gift from the Singhs of Raipur. Building a single-storied house and planting many trees on the barren, bare land for the sake of spiritual practice, he would from time to time take refuge here. In that period, he lived mostly in solitary retreat in the Himalayas. When the railway line was established, Bolpur station lay on the route to the west; there was as yet no other line. So on his way to the Himalayas, my father would first break his journey at Bolpur. The time I came with him, on that occasion too, on his way to the Dalhousie hills, he alighted at Bolpur. I remember that in the morning, before sunrise, he would sit in meditation on the southern bank of the still-unfinished, waterless pond. At sunset, his seat of meditation was beneath the chatim trees. Now, many trees and plants have grown up surrounding the chatim, but then there was nothing at all—before him stretched an open field, unbroken to the western horizon. Certain particular tasks were entrusted to me. He had marked certain verses in the Bhagavad Gita, and each day I would copy some of them for him. Then, in the evening, sitting beneath the open sky, he would tell me about the constellations of the solar universe, and I would listen with utter fascination. I remember writing down and reading back to him this explanation of astronomy from his own lips. From this account one can understand which image of Shantiniketan has become imprinted, in what particular essence, within my mind. First, that invitation I received in boyhood from nature here—its

unbroken sky and field, the distant deep-blue tranquility of the row of sal and palm trees with their towering canopies of branches—has, as a treasure of memory, become forever part of my own nature. After that, in this same sky, in this same light, I have seen the silent offering of my father's morning and evening worship, its profound solemnity. There was nothing else here then—no trees, no such crowd of people and work—only, within that far-reaching stillness, a pure and simple majesty.

Later, when that same boy of that time reached the mature stage of youth, why should the tapovana for children's education be sought elsewhere? I went to my father and told him: Shantiniketan now stands nearly empty; if I can establish an ideal school there, it would give the place a fulfilment of purpose. He gave his consent at once, with enthusiasm. Objection came from the side of my relatives. Their fear was that the natural character of Shantiniketan might undergo change. One cannot hope that, amid the tides of the present age, changes of thought will not come from various directions to construct their own disruption—if one wishes to avoid this, one must keep the ideal lifeless in order to keep it pure. Among all living things—trees, plants, animals—the process of both decay and cultivation goes on simultaneously at all times; to fear this contradictory process too greatly is to cut off one's dealings with life itself. On this argument, considerable and forceful obstruction arose against the fulfilment of my resolve for some time.

This was the obstacle from outside. On the other side, my financial resources were extremely modest, and I had no experience whatsoever in the administrative arrangements of a school. I was making what preparations I could according to my means, and my discussions on this matter proceeded with various people—thus, imperceptibly, the foundation was being laid. But by the time it came to the school's actual work, I had already gained possession of Shantiniketan Ashram. At this time, I met a young man—one might well call him a boy. I believe he had just turned eighteen and entered his nineteenth year. His name was Satishchandra Ray, studying in college, in the B.A. class. His friend Ajitkumar Chakravarty had given me Satish's notebook of poems some time before. Reading it, I had no doubt whatsoever that this boy possessed genuine talent, not merely the ability to write. A few days later, Satish came to see me, bringing his friend along. Calm, gentle, sparing of speech, of beautiful countenance—the mind was naturally drawn to him.

I had recognized Satish as gifted, and so, wherever I found slackness in his writing, I did not hesitate to point it out clearly. Regarding metre in particular, I discussed every line of his work in detail. Ajit was disturbed by my harsh criticism, but Satish could accept it readily, with reverence. Within a short time, the acquaintance I gained with Satish astonished me. As profound as it was extensive, was his experience of literary appreciation. Rarely have I seen anyone absorb Browning's poetry as he did, making it wholly his own. In Shakespeare's works, his command was matched by his joy. My conviction remains firm that in Satish's poetic composition, a robust dramatic quality would one day have emerged, and that from this direction, he would have introduced an entirely new path into Bengali literature. I observed in his nature a rare trait—though his age was young, he had no blind attachment to his own writing. He could view his own works as though standing outside them, and could, without mercy, discard them entirely. This is why I never saw, even shortly afterward, any trace remaining of his writing from that period. From this, it became clear that the distinguishing feature of his poetic nature might be called detachment, or objectivity. His powers of analysis and conception were considerable, but what drew me most intensely toward him was the sensitivity of his mind's touch. In whatever world he found himself born, nowhere was there indifference in him. He had come possessing, at once, the power to extend his own domain everywhere, through both enjoyment and renunciation. His attachment to pleasure and to joy was broad, extending in many directions, but he held no clinging attachment. I remember telling him one day: "You are the poet Bhartrihari; in this world, you are both king and hermit."

At that time, my mind was constantly preoccupied with the vision of Shantiniketan Ashram. My conversations with my newfound young friend continued along these lines. With his natural contemplative gaze, he could see the whole picture directly. In the tale of Utanka that he wrote, he attempted to capture that very image.

At last he could no longer contain his enthusiasm for joy. He said, "Take me into your work." I was overjoyed but for a time would not consent to anything. I knew their circumstances were not good. That after passing his B.A., and then passing the law examination, he would be able to support his family—this was, without doubt, the wish of his guardians. For the time being, I kept him waiting.

At this juncture, my acquaintance with Brahmabandhav Upadhyay grew steadily closer. My collection of poems, Naivedya, had been published shortly before this time. These poems were exceedingly dear to him. In his edited journal [name illegible in original], the praise he expressed for these writings—such generous praise I have found nowhere else, then or since. Indeed, much later, for certain portions of these poems and for the English translations, done in collaboration, of songs from Kheya and Gitanjali, the honour I received—he had given me that same unreserved honour at that very time. It was through this acquaintance that he came to know of my resolve, and learned that I had received my father's consent for the proposal to establish a school at Shantiniketan. He told me there was no need to delay putting this resolve into practice. He, along with several of his devoted disciples and students, entered the work of the ashram. At that time, my own students were Rathindranath and his younger brother Shamindranath. He added a few more besides. Had the numbers not been at least this many, the completeness of the school would have been impossible. The reason was that, following the ancient ideal, my conviction was this—that the relationship between guru and disciple in the matter of imparting education ought to be spiritual. That is, giving education is itself the guru's own principal spiritual practice. Whatever wealth of learning one has received, it is one's own unselfish duty to give that wealth away. In our society, this noble duty had been recognized up to modern times. Now it is being lost, gradually.

At that time, from the few students with whom the school began, no fee or maintenance expenses were taken; almost the entire responsibility for their livelihood I bore from my own modest means. Had Upadhyay and the venerable Revachand—now known by the title Animananda—not borne the greater part of the burden of teaching, carrying on the work would have been altogether impossible. The arrangements then were of the poorest kind, and our manner of living followed the ideal of poverty. The title of "Gurudev" that Upadhyay gave me then, I have had to bear before the people of the ashram to this very day. Just as the financial burden of the ashram, from its beginning until much later, was heavy for me to carry, so too has this title been. Financial hardship and this title—neither can I bear comfortably—but I understand that whoever placed this double burden upon my shoulders as fate has, through their own hand, given this as a gift; from this sorrow and this indignity, I do not hope for release even to the very end.

I have related in some detail the founding story of Shantiniketan School. Along with this, I acknowledge my unpayable debt of gratitude to Upadhyay. Now let me finish the account of that poet-boy Satish as well.

His B.A. examination drew near. His professors expected great achievement from him. Precisely at that time, he did not sit for the examination. His fear was that he would pass. If he passed, all the demands that society would then place upon him—from the pressure and temptation of these he thought escape would become impossible for him, and it was for this very reason that he withdrew at the final moment. From the perspective of worldly life, he brought about a vast tragedy in his own existence. I made every effort to relieve his financial hardship in some measure, but I could never persuade him to accept anything substantial. From time to time I secretly sent money to his family's house. But it was little. By then, whatever I had that was saleable had nearly all been spent—both the resources of the inner household and those outside. I had given the sale-rights of a few valuable books to others for a term of some years. Owing to the confusing complexity of the accounts, that term took an extremely long time to expire. Out of a desire to live by the seaside, I had built a house at Puri. That house, before I had enjoyed it even a single day, had to be sold to meet the demands of the ashram's hunger. Whatever resources remained after that had to be borrowed at high interest as credit. Satish, knowing full well, leapt into this bottomless poverty here with a joyful heart. But his joy knew no bounds—the joy of communion with nature here, the joy of literary appreciation, the joy of self-dedication in every moment.

This boundless joy he spread into the hearts of his students. I remember how many days I walked with him along the sal-tree path, discussing various philosophies—until eleven at night, past midnight—while the whole ashram lay silent in sleep. Remembering him, I wrote—

How many days, along this leaf-strewn
Path, filled with the coming of spring in the scent of flowers,
In the evening, the two of us, in shadow, in moonlight,
Returned in murmuring conversation. In those innocent eyes
The world had appeared, coloured in the hue of paradise.

How many sleepless nights, stirred by the storm of youth,
The nectar-stream of that moonlit night's fellowship
Appeared within your shadow, and was consumed entirely.
How many days that deep moment of joy, in your blossoming,
Mingled utterly into one unbroken song—
In light, in speech, in laughter, in the restless stirring of the forest,
In the wind's languid sigh.—

Such unmixed reverence, such unwavering, unfeigned affection, such all-bearing, all-giving fellowship—how rare it is in life, I have learned in these seventy years of experience. That is why the grief of that untimely departure of my youthful friend I have, to this day, been utterly unable to forget.

Of this ashram-school's distant founding period, its first conception, its sorrow, its joy, its want, its fulfilment, its beloved companionships, its beloved separations, its cruel opposition, and its unsought support—only a little glimpse have I given in this writing. After that, not our will alone, but time's own law has been at work; it has brought so many changes, so many new hopes and failures, so much unimaginable self-dedication from well-wishers, so much causeless enmity from unknown people, so much false slander and praise, so many insurmountable problems—financial and spiritual. Whether I receive due reward or not, I have spent myself to the very limit of my capacity—and now, with weary body and broken health, the day of my own departure approaches. I offer my salutation to Him who has driven me forward through this long, harsh, and difficult path all this while. The failure of this long endeavour is visible outwardly; the complete proof of its fulfilment remains in the unseen letters of an unwritten history.

Ashwin, 1340