

SHORT STORY

THE PROGRESS SOCIETY

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At this particular college, the mixing of young men and women had, if anything, gone rather too far. Most of them came from wealthy homes, and they loved nothing better than throwing money about. They spent freely, in all sorts of needless ways, to earn themselves a reputation for open-handedness among the girls. They set the girls' hearts fluttering, and the girls, in turn, would boast, chests puffed out, "Why, these are our own college boys." They celebrated the Saraswati Puja with such extravagant pomp that the market would run short of marigolds. Beyond all this, there was a constant traffic of winking glances, teasing, and joking. It was into the midst of all this that a certain society rose up in fierce revolt, threatening to wreck the whole business of mixing between the sexes entirely.

At the helm of this society stood Suriti. She named it the Women's Progress Society. Its doors were closed to men. Under the force of Suriti's iron will, something very like a rebellion against men began to stir. Men, it seemed, had become a different caste altogether — one with whom no water was to be shared. Their conduct was declared vile.

That year the Saraswati Puja passed without the least pomp at all. Suriti went from room to room telling the girls that they must not give so much as a paisa toward the extravagant celebrations. Suriti's temperament was very severe, and the girls were afraid of her. Besides, the Women's Progress Society had firmly resolved that on no festival or occasion whatsoever would they spend a single unnecessary coin; instead, whoever had money to spare for such worship should give it, rather, toward the school fees of poorer students.

The young men grew furious at this rebellion. They said, "If we don't carry the bridegroom to your wedding mounted on a donkey's back, our names aren't worth having."

The girls answered, "Such a matched pair of donkeys, one riding upon the back of the other, will be of no use whatsoever in our households. We shall send the two of you along, garlanded and marked with red sandal-paste upon your foreheads, straight to your own gathering. Take them in, and welcome, and pet them all you like."

In any case, in this college a real rift began to open up between the young men and the young women. Whenever any young man came near to speak, the girls would turn up their noses and say, "How forward he is." Some of the young men used to

sit beside the girls, smoking cigarettes; now the girls would simply snatch the cigarette from their lips and throw it away. To treat the young men harshly had become, it seemed, a point of pride for the girls. If ever a young man came forward on the bus to make room for a girl, the rebellious spirit among them would flare up: "What need was there for such a favour? In a crowd, we ask for no special privilege above anyone else."

The society had a favourite saying — that young men were, on the whole, less intelligent than young women. Examination results now and then furnished convenient proof of the claim. If ever some man happened to outstrip them and come first in an examination, the matter became almost an occasion for tears. Indeed, they did not hesitate to lodge an open complaint that some special favouritism must surely have been shown to him.

In earlier days, the girls used to tuck a flower or two into their hair on their way to class, and dress with some little touch of style. Now, in their society, this drew nothing but cries of shame. That women should adorn themselves, wear jewellery, merely to charm the minds of men — this indignity, they declared, women had for far too long borne willingly; it would be borne no longer. Colourless khadi came into fashion. Suriti gave away all her own ornaments to her grandmother, saying, "Use these for your charity — I have no need of them; it will bring you merit." To paint colour over the form Providence has given each of us, she said, was mere barbarism — fit only for the interior of Africa. Had the other girls said to her, "Look here, Suriti, don't carry it so far. Have you read Rabindranath's *Chitrangada*? Chitrangada knew how to fight, but she never learned the art of winning a man's heart, and that alone was her undoing" — hearing this, Suriti would flare up at once and say, "I will not accept that. There could be no greater insult than such a thing."

Among the girls themselves, a certain private rebellion of feeling began to appear. Some began to say that this deliberate estrangement between men and women was altogether out of step with the modern age. The dissenters said: that men should show us special regard, offer us their chairs, stoop to pick up our dropped handkerchiefs — this is precisely as it ought to be. Why should Suriti call it an insult? We call it, rather, an honour. We ought to be extracting service from men. There was once a day when women were mere servants, mere handmaids. Now men

come and sing our praises — this is respect, whatever Suriti may say. "We shall not give it up. Now, at last, man is our servant."

Such murmuring discontent began, quietly, to stir among them all. Salila, in particular, had grown thoroughly weary of this joyless new discipline of the classroom. She came from a wealthy family, and, growing tired of it all, went off to an English college in Darjeeling. In this way, one or two girls began to slip away — but Suriti's own resolve did not waver in the least.

This pride, especially Suriti's, grew unbearable to the young men. They began to torment her in every manner they could devise. The mathematics master was an exceedingly strict man, who tolerated no foolishness whatever. One day, in his very classroom, a tremendous commotion broke out. An envelope, in her father's own handwriting, lay upon Suriti's desk — the moment she opened it, out came fluttering a cockroach. A great uproar followed. The terrified creature took refuge in the hair-bun of the girl seated beside her. What chaos followed then may well be imagined. Benibabu, the mathematics master, did his best to fix a stern glare upon the class, but what authority could stand against the fluttering of a cockroach? Amid all that shrieking, there was no restoring the dignity of the room. On another occasion, the boys filled every page of Suriti's notebook with snuff — very strong snuff indeed. The moment she opened the book, a violent, contagious fit of sneezing broke out. The powder found its way into the noses of the girls sitting nearby, and soon everyone was streaming at both eyes and nose. Between the rapid volleys of sneezing, there was no possibility of any lesson continuing. The master watched sidelong, struggling himself to suppress his own laughter.

One day word went round that some maharaja was coming to visit the college, and especially to see the girls' classroom. A whisper passed from ear to ear that his true purpose in coming was to find himself a bride. A number of the girls affected to feel insulted by the very idea. And yet, that same day, one noticed a little extra artistry in the arrangement of certain hair-buns, and a touch more colour in certain sari-borders. He was, after all, no ordinary man — a crorepati. Among the girls there arose a quiet flurry of eagerness, each hoping to be the first to catch his eye. The class proceeded as usual. Afterward a messenger arrived to announce that his choice had fallen upon none other than Suriti herself. Suriti knew well enough how, in the bottomless treasury of such a raja, every meanness of the male sex could

conveniently vanish from sight. She made a show of not merely declining the proposal but feeling positively insulted by it — for, she said, a girls' classroom was no cattle market, where some trader might come and pick out his cow. And yet, in her heart, she had rather hoped for a little more coaxing and persuasion first. It was at just this moment that word came that the maharaja, turban and all, had vanished entirely — leaving word behind that among all the Bengali girls he had seen, he had not found a single one worthy of his choice, and that even the Veda-women of the western provinces were, by comparison, a good deal finer.

The whole class of girls burst into fury at once. "Who asked him to come here and insult us so!" they cried. The little touches of finery some of them had allowed themselves that day now became a source only of shame. It was at this point that the truth came out: the "maharaja" was, in fact, an old student of the very same college, who had gambled away his parents' entire fortune and was now going about in search of some wealthy girl to marry. The girls hung their heads. Suriti insisted, over and over, that she had never for a moment believed a word of it — that not only had she disbelieved it from the very start, she had even been prepared to lodge a formal complaint with the college principal over this disruption to their studies. Perhaps she had been prepared to do so — but no evidence of it was ever produced.

In this fashion, one disturbance followed another without end. The chief instigator behind most of this mischief was Nihar.

Once, as Suriti was on her way to collect her degree, Nihar came up beside her and said, "Well now, proud lady — your feet scarcely seem to touch the ground!"

Suriti twisted her mouth and said, "Kindly do not make a joke of my name."

Nihar said, "You, a learned woman, call this a joke? Why, it is a direct quotation from the purest classical literature! What greater honour could any name possibly receive!"

"I have no need of your honour."

"And how am I to live, then, without offering it? O thou whose eyes are as the opening lotus, O thou whose face is as the full autumn moon, O thou whose gentle smile spreads forth like moonlight — to call you by such fond names is a pleasure that never grows old."

"If you go on insulting me like this, in the middle of the street, I shall report you to the principal."

"Report me if you like — but first give me a proper definition of insult. Which word, exactly, was the insult? Tell me, and I shall raise the pitch even higher. Shall I call you, then — O thou who dost drive mad the heart of the whole universe—"

Red with fury, Suriti walked swiftly away. Behind her rose a great roar of laughter. Voices called after her: "Turn back, O thou of the wrath-reddened eyes, O thou drunk with the pride of youth like a rutting elephant—"

The next day, at the very start of class, a voice rose up: "O thou who dost wander humming among the lotus-petals at Saraswati's feet, thou drunken honeybee, O thou whose face is like the full moon—"

Suriti, furious, went to the superintendent, Gobindababu, in the next room. "If they go on insulting me at every turn like this, I shall not stay."

He came in and said to the boys of the class, "Why do you torment her so?"

Nihar said, "Do you call this tormenting? If anyone had cause to complain, surely it would be the full moon itself, for my having made a joke at its expense. There's a fellow in our class, Jogesh, who says — leave out the rest of it, and simply call her 'sharp-faced,' since her face is as pointed as a pen-nib. When I heard that, I told him, 'Shame on you, one mustn't speak of learned ladies so' — I suppressed it entirely. But in calling her 'moon-faced,' I confess I see no fault at all."

The boys said, "Consider it fairly, sir — we were simply reciting, in a spirit of pure delight, 'O thou who dost wander humming among the lotus-petals at Saraswati's feet, thou drunken honeybee!' In the first place, there was nothing derogatory in it whatever; and in the second, why should she assume, with such vanity, that it was aimed at her in particular? There are other girls in the room too, and they seemed pleased enough by it."

The superintendent said, "People generally take such greetings, offered at the wrong time and place, as nothing more than harmless teasing. What need is there to make so much of it?"

"But sir, when the heart grows restless, does it stop to consider the proper time and place? And besides, if these greetings of ours are truly nothing but teasing,

then surely no one need take them personally at all, but simply laugh them off. And in your college, with so many learned young ladies — can they not answer a joke with a joke of their own? Will no gleam of wit ever light up their pearly smiles? If not, how are we poor, thirsty, nectar-craving men ever to survive?"

Such exchanges went on, now and then, without end. Suriti grew increasingly restless — her natural gravity could no longer hold. She had no gift for teasing, nor any sharp words with which to answer back. She burned and smouldered within. There were, among the young men, one or two who felt some genuine pity for Suriti's plight — but they found no place to make themselves heard.

Another day, on some sudden whim, as Suriti was arriving at the college, Nihar called out to her from across the street: "O thou fair as a garland of golden champak blossoms!"

The fellow had read a very great deal, and seemed to have a positive passion for the study of language. He would recite Sanskrit at any moment, without the least provocation, and the sound of it pleased people's ears. In the assigned coursework, Suriti generally stayed ahead of him; she was a master of rote learning. But beyond the syllabus, Nihar's reading was extraordinarily wide. Suriti, very nearly in tears, ran straight to Gobindababu's room and said, "I cannot bear such greetings on the open street."

Nihar said, "I have done wrong. From tomorrow I shall call her 'ink-black of complexion' instead — though perhaps that would be a little too realistic."

Suriti, almost weeping, ran away.

There was a hard streak of cruelty in Nihar's nature, one that could only be soothed by an appropriate bribe. Everyone knew as much.

One day Nihar came filling the boys' pockets with a Japanese toy — a wooden frog that made a sharp clacking sound. It happened just at the moment when Plato's philosophy was to be explained — a steady clack-clack-clack broke out across the whole classroom. It was impossible to say exactly where the sound was coming from. That day Plato's own voice was entirely drowned out by the clacking of the frogs. In the end, upon a thorough search, ten wooden frogs were discovered inside Suriti's own desk.

She cried out at once, "These are not mine! Someone else has been playing a trick and stuffed them into my desk."

The boys, up in arms, retorted, "We will not stand for so unjust an accusation. No man could possibly take pleasure in so childish a game as this. Such things belong entirely to the province of little girls."

For a while the classroom fell silent. Then, suddenly, a strange sound rose from another corner — all the boys had begun, in unison, scraping their feet against the cement floor. So many shoes scraping together produced a truly hideous concert. It grew steadily worse, until Suriti could sit silent no longer. She held her patience a while, and then, all at once, a great crash sounded, followed by the boys imitating, with loud oohs and ahs, the wailing drone of a shehnai.

At this Suriti burst out, "Sir, will you please be so kind as to stop them making all this noise? We have come here to study — this is no place for musical entertainment. If anyone has no wish to attend the class, he ought simply to leave it."

At once a cry of "Shame! Shame!" rose from every side, and the boys marched out of the room in step, left-right, left-right. That day's class could not be salvaged. When the girls, having left the classroom, sat together in the common room, a peon came in with a message — the secretary wished to see Suriti at once. A murmur of whispers passed among the girls. Suriti went into the secretary's office and found the day's professor seated there, with Nihar standing beside him. The secretary said to Suriti, "The boys have complained that they felt insulted by your conduct today. If you have anything to say on your own behalf, say it now."

Suriti said, "Sir, when they behave so insultingly toward their own professor, and so rudely toward the rest of us — is that not an insult to us as well?"

In any case, having heard both sides and weighed the matter, the secretary said to Nihar, "It has been established, on every account, that you were the one who began the disturbance in class, and that you were its ringleader. It is you who ought to apologise."

Nihar said, "Sir, that is not possible for me. Rather, grant me leave — I am willing to leave the college altogether."

The secretary said, "I shall give you time. Think it over carefully."

He said, "So be it," gathered up his books, and rose. That day, as the students came out at the end of class, they found a notice pinned to the board: as of today, the Puja holidays had begun.

Salila and Nihar had grown quite close. She proposed to him, "Come along to Darjeeling too."

Nihar said, "My father is no millionaire like yours. Where would I find the means to study in Darjeeling?"

Hearing this, the girl said, "Very well — I shall bear your expenses."

Nihar had this particular gift: whatever was given to him, he pocketed without the least hesitation. He at once resolved to go to Darjeeling at the wealthy girl's expense.

Meanwhile, however much pride Suriti still carried, it struck her hard that Nihar's affections had turned toward Salila. Sheltered now by a wealthy girl's patronage, Nihar began saying whatever he pleased about Suriti, more often than ever. He would say, "Only those women who have not abandoned their proper feminine nature have any right to expect courtesy from men." Suriti would toss her head and pretend to dismiss such neglect from men — but it cannot be said that, deep within her, there was no wish at all to win Nihar's regard. Some of the boys, out of envy, and others out of contempt, called Nihar a "kept husband" for accepting a monthly allowance from a wealthy girl. Nihar paid no attention whatever. What he needed was money. So long as it kept him supplied with picnics for his friends at Firpo's, and with all manner of fashionable and useful things besides, he felt not the slightest hesitation in remaining dependent upon that girl's charity. Whenever he needed money, he simply wrote to Salila and asked for it. Salila had complete faith in the genius of this man she kept, and believed that one day Nihar would make a great name for himself. That his genius carried an unquestionable claim upon the whole world's recognition — Nihar never once failed to hint at it, and Salila accepted it as true.

While Salila was still in Darjeeling, she came down with double pneumonia. Every care was taken in her treatment, but the messenger of death could not be turned away. Salila died. Right to the end, Nihar had gone on hoping that she might leave

him something in her will. But no trace of any such bequest was found, and this filled him with bitter resentment toward her. Especially when he learned that she had left her own maidservant a hundred rupees, he cried out against Salila in disgust — "What meanness! What the English call sheer meanness!"

The girl whom Nihar had once worshipped in verse as "Mother of the World" had now completed her turn of nurturing this particular man, and departed, leaving him to the shock of disappointment. He could no longer afford to remain in Darjeeling, and returned once more to his lodgings in Calcutta. The other boys had a good laugh over it. It did not trouble Nihar in the least. He had every hope that some second "Mother of the World" would soon come his way. A famous Oriya fortune-teller had once told him that he would win the favour of some very wealthy girl. He waited, eagerly, for that prophecy to come true. There was no telling by which road, after all, a Mother of the World might arrive. In the meantime, he found himself in the most severe financial straits.

When Suriti unexpectedly saw Nihar, newly returned from Darjeeling, back at college, she too was surprised. "When did you get back from the Himalayas?" she asked.

Nihar smiled and said, "Ah, my lady of the fair parting — I've come back after taking a little mountain air. Kalidasa says: *Mandakininirjharashikaranam bodha muhuh kampitadevadaruh* — 'ever trembling with the spray of the Mandakini's cascade.' But the chill winds of Bengal shook these thin bones of mine a good deal harder than any deodar tree — look, I've had to come back wrapped in a blanket like a proper Bhutia."

Suriti laughed and said, "Well, the costume doesn't suit you badly at all — and you look quite well besides. The Bhutia get-up rather becomes you."

Nihar said, "I'm glad to hear it — at least now I need not worry about protection from the cold. The real problem now is what I shall use to dazzle your eyes instead — a far harder question."

Suriti: Why bother dazzling anyone's eyes at all? You know perfectly well you have no shortage of the art of charming men — I mean women — you have no shortage of it.

Nihar: There you're mistaken. Newton said he had merely gathered pebbles on the shore of the ocean of knowledge; I have gathered no more than a few grains of sand.

Suriti: Good heavens! It seems you've brought back a great deal of humility from the mountains — you never had any of that before.

Nihar: You see, this is a lesson I learned from Kalidasa himself, who said: *Pramshulabhye phale lobhad udbahur iva vamanah* — 'like a dwarf reaching greedily for fruit too high to grasp.'

Suriti: I've had quite enough of these Sanskrit verses to last me a lifetime — do speak a little plain Bengali for once.

Curiously enough, throughout all this, he did not once so much as mention Salila's death.

Just then the class bell forced them both to hurry off — but the Sanskrit verses went on trembling, again and again, in Suriti's mind, like the spray upon that deodar. She had noticed, of late, that the other girls very much enjoyed Nihar's teasing and his Sanskrit recitations. They praised him for it, and so she too came to understand that there was nothing bitter in the jest after all. And so, of late, she had begun trying, in her own way, to find pleasure in Nihar's sudden bursts of Sanskrit.

It was around this time that an event occurred which gave the students an occasion to work together, side by side. A scholar of Indian archaeology from the Sorbonne was to visit, at the invitation of Calcutta University. The students resolved that they, and no one else, would be the first to seize the honour of welcoming him along the way. They went ahead to the professor and extended him an invitation, in the name of their Progress Society. With that excess of French courtesy for which he was known, he accepted at once. The question then arose of who was to read the address of welcome. Some suggested Sanskrit; others thought English would do well enough — but neither idea satisfied anyone. In the end they decided that a French scholar ought properly to be honoured in the French language. But who was to deliver it? Outsiders could be found for the task, easily enough, but that would hardly preserve their honour. It was at this point that Niharranjan spoke up: "If you entrust this to me, I believe I can carry it off — and carry it off well, too."

Among the girls there were some with a particular fondness for Niharranjan, and they said, "Let's see, then."

Suriti objected strongly. "It will only turn into a farce," she said.

The other girls said, "We are foreigners, after all — if there is some small error in our language or delivery, the French professor will surely take it in good humour. They are not Englishmen, after all — the English can never bear the smallest lapse in their own etiquette even from foreigners, such is their pride. But the French are not like that; if anything is a little imperfect, they will accept it with a smile. Let's see just how far Niharranjan's learning really goes. I hear he sits at home practising his French all on his own."

Niharranjan's family home was in Chandannagar. In his early years he had been schooled at a French school there, where he had won considerable renown for his command of the language — a fact none of his friends in Calcutta had ever known. Be that as it may, he girded himself and stepped forward. And, to everyone's astonishment, when he delivered the address of welcome, the brilliance of his language left the French scholar and his one or two attendants utterly amazed. They declared they had never, outside of France itself, heard such refined and polished French. They said this young man ought by rights to go to Paris and take his degree there. From that day on, a chorus of praise rose up among the professors of the college; they said the college's own reputation had been vindicated, and had, indeed, quite outshone that of Calcutta University itself in the eyes of the world.

After this, no one had it in them to look down on Nihar any longer. The college rang with the murmured refrain, "Nihar-da, Nihar-da." The Progress Society's very first rule could no longer be upheld. They had once given up wearing colourful clothing, so as not to charm the minds of men. Suriti herself was the first to break that rule, adding a touch of colour to the border of her sari. The old opposition she had once felt began to give way, and she found herself, with some hesitation, drawing closer to Niharranjan — though that hesitation, it seems, did not hold for long.

She noticed that the other girls were all outstripping her. Some invited him to tea; others secretly left bound sets of Tennyson as gifts inside his desk. But Suriti found herself falling behind. When one girl gave Nihar a beautifully embroidered table-cover, worked entirely by her own hand, it struck Suriti to the quick for the first time. She thought, "If only I had practised such feminine handicrafts myself." She

had never in her life so much as threaded a needle — she had only ever read books. That old pride in her own learning now began, for the first time, to seem to her a poor and paltry thing. "If only there were something I could do that might catch Nihar's eye" — but there was nothing to be done about it now. The other girls socialised with him so easily, so naturally. Suriti wished very much that she, too, could join in as they did — but somehow it never fit. The result was that her own devotion to him grew, if anything, more intense than that of any of the other girls. She would have counted it a privilege to bring some harm upon herself, on any pretext at all, for Nihar's sake. The whole wind of the Progress Society's sails had shifted entirely.

The other girls, in time, settled back steadily into their studies — but Suriti could not manage it. One day, Nihar's fountain pen rolled off his desk onto the floor; she was the very first to pick it up and hand it back to him. No greater fall from her old self could Suriti ever have suffered. One day, in a speech, Nihar quoted a line from a French playwright: "Every beautiful thing carries its own veil; once the breath of a man's gaze falls upon it, its delicate bloom is spoiled. The chief reason our women, in the old days, so seldom showed themselves before men was precisely this — that by showing herself, a woman's worth diminishes. Marks begin to appear upon the surface of her grace." The other girls rose at once in heated protest against this idea. Such veiling and hiding away in the name of preserving one's grace, they said, was nothing but a wretched mockery. In this world, the touch of the other sex, whether for man or for woman, was equally necessary to both. What was truly astonishing was that it was Suriti herself, of all people, who rose and defended Nihar's words.

Under this single influence from the Sorbonne, her whole manner and conduct changed completely. Now she went to Nihar for advice on everything. When Shakespeare's plays were shown at the cinema, could the girls not go with some male guardian to see them? Nihar issued a stern ruling — no, not even that. If an exception were allowed on any account whatsoever, the rule itself could no longer be upheld.

Before this, whenever there was anything worth seeing, Suriti had always gone to the cinema. Now what became of her? Such a sacrifice could hardly have been imagined — she even gave up attending those social gatherings, now common

enough, where men and women dined together. The traditionalists praised her highly for it. She struck her own name from the rolls of the Progress Society, of her own accord.

When Suriti wished to take up a teaching post, she asked Nihar's permission first — could she, in a school, be allowed to teach male pupils, even very young boys?

Nihar said no, that would not do either. The result was that she accepted the post at half salary, and said the remaining half should go toward hiring someone else to teach the boys separately. The school secretary was quite astonished.

Suriti's devotion of heart grew steadily more unbearable. At one point she had, in some roundabout way, hinted at the possibility of their marrying. But she learned, by the very rules of the society she herself had once refused to obey, that such a marriage could, on no account, ever take place. And yet to go on, bowing her head forever, serving this man in perfect submission — in that, apparently, there was no wrong at all, for such, it seemed, was the ordinance of Providence.

She often heard that Nihar's circumstances were not good — that he had to borrow the very books he needed to study. Suriti then began helping him generously from her own scholarship stipend. Nihar felt not the slightest shame in accepting it. It seemed men had every right to receive such offerings from women. And yet his pride in his own learning knew no bounds. Once, a post for a professor of Bengali fell vacant at a certain college. At Suriti's urging, a discussion began, favourably, on offering the post to Nihar. But the very fact that his name was being discussed by a committee wounded his pride deeply.

Suriti said to Nihar, "This pride of yours is quite unreasonable. Even the Viceroy's own appointments are discussed among the members of Council before they're made."

Nihar said, "That may well be — but wherever I am accepted, I must be accepted without any discussion whatsoever. Otherwise my dignity cannot be preserved. I stood first in all Bengal in my M.A. in Bengali. I cannot possibly accept a post that has been swept up for me out of some committee's leftover discussion."

Had he taken the post, Nihar would no longer have needed Suriti's financial help. He refused the post — but not the need. Suriti's own stipend was very nearly used up entirely. Her family grew deeply alarmed at her behaviour and her appearance.

Her health had never been strong since childhood, and now, on top of it, this self-inflicted hardship — when at last they understood for whose sake she was performing this penance, they went to Nihar and said, "Either marry her, or give up her company altogether."

Nihar said, "Marriage is entirely out of the question — and as for giving up her company, why say this to me? She is free to give up my company herself, any time she likes; I would raise not the slightest objection."

Suriti knew this well enough. She knew that, to Nihar, she held no value whatsoever beyond her usefulness to him. Once that usefulness ceased, he would drive her off without a second thought, like a stray dog from the street. Knowing all this, she went on, by every means she could, supplying him with conveniences, buying him books, presenting him with lengths of new khadi cloth — binding him to herself, however she could, through the sheer self-interest of his own convenience. Since there was no other course open to her, Suriti accepted even this indignity.

At one point she was offered a well-paying post as principal in a district school. But her only thought, then, was: "Here am I, living in such comfort, while he remains there like a pauper — how can I bear it?" And so, in due course, she gave up the position without any real cause, and took, instead, a poorly paid teaching post in Calcutta. Three-quarters of her salary went straight to filling Niharranjan's stomach and buying him his little luxuries. In this very loss lay her only joy. She knew she had never possessed the art of charming a man's heart — and it was precisely for this reason that her self-sacrifice grew so boundless. It was through this sacrifice, and this alone, that she hoped to surpass every other girl. Besides, she had, of late, been hearing again and again the fashionable new doctrine of "progress" turned upon its head — that it was the very ordinance of Providence for a woman to sacrifice herself for a man; that a woman who did not offer herself up for a man's sake was no true woman at all. Such notions took complete hold of her.

The lodging she rented in Calcutta was cheap indeed — damp, and a breeding-ground for illness. There was no going out onto its roof; water lay constantly pooling at the washing-place. On top of all this, she began doing something she had never once done in her life — cooking her own meals with her own hands. She knew a great many things, but she had never once learned the art of cooking. Whatever inedible, unwholesome dish resulted, she forced herself to eat it and fill

her stomach. Her health broke down completely. Now and then she was forced to take leave from work, with a doctor's certificate. Such absences grew so frequent that the school authorities could no longer grant her any more leave. It was then discovered that consumption had, all this while, been quietly taking hold of her. She had to be moved from her lodgings; her relatives, gathering together, admitted her to a private hospital. No one knew that she had, secretly, some small savings set by — and it was from this very money that her allotted share continued to reach Nihar as before. Nihar knew the whole of her condition, and yet went on, without the slightest hesitation, holding out his hand for this money as though it were his rightful due. And yet he could never once find the time to visit her, even a single day, in the hospital. Suriti would lie there, straining her ears eagerly toward the window — but no sound of any familiar footstep ever reached her. At last, one day, her small purse of savings ran entirely dry — and with it, so too did the final offering of her own self.