ESSAY

WIT ANDIRONY: Humorous Essays

Rabindranath Tagore



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THE FRUITS OF WIT

It was nothing more than this: I had written a rather amusing essay for a monthly journal. My close friends had, of course, laughed upon reading it—but now even the opposing camp is laughing heartily.

Three readers, writing from Ashtapaika, Saptibari, and Tangail, have sent letters asking what the essay actually means. One among them, with great courtesy, has surmised that the fault lies with the printing press; another, out of quite unnecessary tenderness of heart, has expressed anxiety concerning the author's state of mind; the third has passed beyond both conjecture and apprehension into a condition for which—in truth—it is I who ought to feel anxious on his behalf.

The esteemed Panchkari Pal writes from Habiganj:

"What is the purpose of Gobindababu's essay? Will it end the sufferings of the weavers of Farashdanga? So many people in this country are being bitten by mad dogs—has this essay proposed any remedy whatsoever for that?"

In the journal *Agyanatimiranibarani*, the following critique of the said essay has appeared:

"If Gobindababu truly believes that the cultivation of jute in the rice-fields of this country is improving the condition of the farmers, then we cannot agree with the argument of his essay. And if he means to say that abandoning jute in favor of rice cultivation is preferable, that too is not entirely true. But which of these is actually his opinion is difficult to determine from the essay itself."

Difficult indeed—without doubt—for the simple reason that I have never, on any day, said a single word about the cultivation of jute.

The *Gyanaprakash* says—

"From the tone and manner of the writing, it seems the author has attempted to make us weep over the sorrows of child-widowhood—but weeping aside, we have been unable to restrain our laughter from beginning to end."

For the failure to restrain laughter, I bear full responsibility; but what he suddenly imagined he had grasped between the lines was entirely a product of his own inner disposition.

In a weekly paper called *Sammarjani* it has been written:

"There can be no doubt that the profound essay Gobindababu has published against the Harirampur Municipality is lucid and forceful; but on one point we were grieved and astonished—he has, with the utmost ease, passed off another's thoughts as his own. In one place he writes, 'To grow attached is to die'—had he not stolen this admirable sentiment from the work of the Greek scholar Socrates, we should have praised the author's originality. Below we furnish several samples of the stolen goods: Gibbon has said that where there is no king in the realm, utter disorder ensues; Gobindababu writes, 'Here anarchy, there drought, and upon it all the bursting of boils.' The Sanskrit verse, too, is stolen from Kalidasa. In Ruskin there occurs a description: the full moon rises in the sky, and its moonlight falls upon the waters of the sea. Gobindababu writes: 'The light of the fifth-day moon glimmers upon Ramadhan Babu's bald pate.' What astonishing theft! What extraordinary deception!! What unparalleled audacity!!!"

The *Sangbadsar* says—

"There can be no doubt that Ramadhan Babu is none other than Shyamacharan Trivedi of Newgipara. Shyamacharan Babu has no bald pate, it is true, but we have made inquiries and discovered that his second nephew's head has begun to show the faint beginnings of baldness. Such a personal reference is most reprehensible."

I find myself in a muddle of my own making. As for my essay written against the Harirampur Municipality, the argument of the *Sammarjani* is utterly unassailable—for of Harirampur, whether it lies in the Twenty-Four Parganas or neither stands nor walks within the sub-division of Hanskhali, I know absolutely nothing; whether a municipality exists there, or has existed, or shall exist in future, lies quite beyond the reach of my dreams.

On the other hand, it is equally difficult to doubt that in my essay I have cast an unjust and slighting glance at the esteemed Shyamacharan Trivedi of Newgipara. The *Sangbadsar* has marshaled its proof with such tight-woven care that there is not room to pass even a needle through it. I do know a certain person, but the poor fellow is not named Trivedi, but Majumdar; his home lies not in Newgipara but in Jhinaidah; and as for whether baldness sits upon his nephew's head—let that pass, for he has no nephew at all, though he does have two sisters' sons, it is true.

As for those who say I have compared the blackness of character of the owners of the Barakar stone-coal mines to the coal itself, they would do me a kindness by informing me whether such a mine exists, and where, and if it does exist, what of it—should they take the trouble to write and inform me fully, my ignorance regarding the secrets of mining would at once be dispelled. Whoever says whatever he pleases, I can swear upon oath that concerning "the Salt Tax," "Widow Remarriage," or "Cow's Ghee" I have said nothing whatsoever.

Meanwhile, trouble has broken out at home as well. As proof of profound reflection, I had written in one place: "This world is a menagerie." I had assumed my readers would laugh. I have now obtained proof that at least three readers did not laugh at all. First, my brother-in-law came and abused me roundly; he said he was certain I had called him the beast in question. I said, there would be no offense in saying so, but I swear to you, I did not say it. On account of an insult to her brother, his sister—a Brahmin lady—is threatening to go to her father's house. The landlord, Pashupati Babu, keeps flaring up in anger and puffing out his moustaches like a cat's whiskers; he says I have taken the liberty of addressing him as "brother-in-law" without any right to do so, and that the things he is now saying about me in society are not fit to be repeated. Meanwhile, at the house in Pakrashi, Jagat Babu, sipping his tea, read my essay and burst into uproarious laughter, and was in the midst of constructing an elaborate simile between the crash of thunder and lightning and the matter of tea spilling from his mouth and crumbs of toast—when just at that moment he came upon the line "this world is a menagerie," and the force of his laughter suddenly halted and lodged in his throat along with the tea—people thought there would be no time to summon a doctor.

The entire neighborhood is convinced that in my essay I have hinted at some truth or other concerning their most revered uncle, father-in-law, or sister's-daughter's-husband; they are now openly declaring that they too intend to cast their eyes upon my fragile skull. As to what the profound intent of my essay actually is, they refuse to believe my account of it—but as to what their intentions toward me might be, I have no grounds whatsoever to disbelieve their account of that. Indeed, their language is growing plainer and plainer with each passing day. I have concluded that I must change my lodgings, and that the language of my writing, too, requires alteration. Whatever else I do, I shall no longer attempt to make people laugh.

THE WASP'S REMARKS UPON THE ANT

Look, look—look at the ant! Tiny, tiny, reddish, reddish, slender, slender little things going about their business—those are all ants, called in Sanskrit *pipilika*. I am the Wasp, born of the exalted Wasp lineage, and the sight of these ants fills me with the most tremendous mirth.

Ha ha ha—just look at the manner of it, look how they crawl along, as though mingled with the very dust! When I stand up, my head touches the sky! Were the sun a lump of sugar-candy, I feel I could stretch up, break off pieces, and store them away in my nest. Ah—I have dragged along such an enormous straw, over such a vast stretch of road, and look what those creatures are doing—three of them together, hauling at a single dead fly! What a monstrous disparity between us! Truly, I say, it gives me the greatest amusement to watch them.

Look at my leg, and look at theirs! However far I look, I cannot see where my leg ends—so immense a leg! What greater dignity could one hope for than this? And yet the ants seem perfectly content with their tiny, tiny legs. It is astonishing to behold. But then, after all, an ant is an ant.

They are so minute, and I look down upon them from such a height, that I cannot take in the whole of them at once. Yet standing upon my extremely long six legs, casting but a sidelong glance, I have grasped, by mere estimation, their entire being from head to foot—for an ant is so small that it takes very little time indeed to see the whole of one. I shall write a book in the Wasp tongue on the subject of the ant race, and deliver lectures upon it as well.

I have arrived, through much inference, at many conclusions regarding ant society. We Wasps possess parental affection; therefore ants can never possess any such thing—for they are ants, mere ants, nothing whatsoever but ants. It is said that ants can build their homes in the earth; it is plain enough that they have learned the art of architecture from the Wasp race—for they are ants, common ants, called in Sanskrit *pipilika*.

The sight of ants fills me with the deepest tenderness; the urge to do them good grows exceedingly strong within me. Indeed, I feel a wish to leave civilized Wasp society for a time, and, taking with me troops upon troops of my Wasp brethren, to settle within the ants' own home and devote myself to the reform of ant society—to this extent I am prepared to make sacrifice. We are willing to swallow down their grains of sugar and, spreading hand and foot within their burrows, to somehow eke out our existence there—provided that, in return, they show even the slightest improvement.

They do not wish for improvement—they wish to eat their own sugar themselves and dwell in their own burrows themselves, and the reason is that they are ants, utterly and simply ants. But when we are Wasps, we shall certainly grant them improvement, and we shall eat their sugar and dwell in their burrows—we, together with our nephews, our sisters'-sons, our brothers'-daughters, and our brothers-in-law.

Should you ask why we ought to eat their sugar and dwell in their burrows, the chief reason I can offer is simply this: that they are ants and we are Wasps! Secondly, we have selflessly devoted ourselves to the betterment of the ants, and therefore we shall eat their sugar and dwell also in their burrows. Thirdly, we must leave behind our beloved Wasp-land to come here, and therefore, to console ourselves for that sorrow, it is necessary that we eat rather more sugar than usual. Fourthly, we must move about among foreign and alien peoples abroad, where all manner of diseases may be contracted—in which case, I suppose, we shall not live very long. Alas, how pitiable is our condition! Therefore sugar we must eat, and of the burrow too, whatever space there is, we and our brothers-in-law shall divide and take between us.

Should the ants object, we shall call them ungrateful! Should they wish to eat sugar and to have room in the burrow, we shall tell them plainly, in the Wasp tongue: you are ants, you are small, you are *pipilika*. What argument could be more compelling than this!

But then what shall the ants eat? That I do not know. Perhaps there may indeed be a shortage of food and shelter, but this they ought, with patience, to consider: that through our long and continued contact, there is every likelihood that their own rank shall gradually rise. There will be not the slightest want of order and peace.

Let them attain gradual improvement, and let us gradually eat their sugar—if such an arrangement can be maintained, then indeed shall order and peace be preserved; otherwise, what check is there upon violent quarreling?—When a heavy burden rests upon one's head, one must proceed with just such careful deliberation.

And if, for want of sugar and under the excessive burden of peace and order, the ant race should perish? Why then, we shall simply go elsewhere to propagate improvement—for we are the Wasp race, exceedingly advanced by virtue of our exalted station.

Chaitra, 1292

ARCHAEOLOGY

1

Whether Galvanic Batteries Existed in Ancient India, and What the Ancient Name for Oxygen Gas Was

The matter is undeniably one of the utmost gravity; but we do not concede that no evidence whatsoever can be gathered on this subject. That ancient India possessed no history is a claim past all belief; the true want lies rather in modern India's utter dearth of inquiry and research. Readers of the present essay will discover that our own investigations have not been wanting, and that they have yielded results of no small measure.

Before we can settle whether Galvanic batteries existed in ancient India, and what name was given there to Oxygen gas, it is first essential to determine the dates of the scholars Kittakabhatta and Pundraverdhana Mishra.

First, let it be settled beyond all doubt during whose reign Kittakabhatta dwelt. On this point opinions differ. Some say he was minister to Purandarasena; others hold that he was court-scholar to Vijayapala. It must be ascertained how many kings bore the name Purandarasena, and among them who ruled in Mithila, who in Utkal, and who in Kashmir; and further, whose reign fell five hundred years before the Christian era, whose nine hundred years after, and whose was contemporaneous with it. Bodhanacharya writes in his royal chronicle: *paramparamprathita-pathiko* (here two leaves of the manuscript are missing) *lasatyaso*. Regarding the meaning of this verse, our opinion does not concur with that of the eminent antiquarian scholar Madhusudan Shastri.

For in the *Nripatinirghanta*, Utankasuri writes: "Nig...nanda...paranta...njam." Whatever meaning this once bore has, for the most part, been thoroughly digested by insects. What little remains offers no support at all to the reading given by Bodhanacharya—this much is certain.

But to compare the authority of the two writings, one must first establish the relative dates of birth of Bodhanacharya and Utankasuri.

Let us see, then, what the Chinese pilgrim Nin-fu says concerning Bodhanacharya. Most unfortunately, he says nothing whatsoever.

We have searched through the entire works of the Arab traveler Al-Karim, the Portuguese traveler Gonsalez, and the Greek philosopher Maximos. It is, first, the historian's duty to determine the dates of travel of these three persons, and we stand ready to undertake it; but for the sake of brevity, it must be said beforehand that in none of the writings of these three travelers is there any mention whatsoever of Bodhanacharya or Utankasuri. In Nin-fu's work there is a reference to a person named Hallo-ko. Every antiquarian will readily perceive that the name Hallo-ko is a Chinese corruption of the name Bodhanacharya. But Hallo-ko might equally well be Bodhanacharya, or, for that matter, Shambaradutta—nothing prevents it.

Therefore, whether Purandarasena was one person or several, or whether he existed at all, there is, in the first place, no evidence whatsoever; and secondly, whether this doubtful Purandarasena had any connection at all with Kittakabhatta or Pundraverdhana Mishra, that too lies beyond anyone's power to determine.

Therefore, if in the works composed by the said Kittakabhatta and Pundraverdhana Mishra, entitled *Mohantaka* and *Gyananjana*, no mention whatsoever is found of Galvanic batteries or of Oxygen, what can be proved from this fact? It is difficult to say. Only this much may be asserted: that in the time of the said scholars, Galvanic batteries and Oxygen had not yet been discovered. But what that time actually was, should I venture a conjecture, Madhusudan Shastri will surely protest—and should he venture one, I shall surely protest in turn; of that there can be no doubt.

Here, then, we must take our leave of Kittaka and Pundraverdhana. Our discussion of them has been exceedingly brief, and for this I beg the reader's pardon. But it must be borne in mind that, first, in regard to determining the dates and lineages of the eighteen kings—Nanda, Upananda, Ananda, Vyomapala, Kshemapala, Anangapala, and the rest—the opinion of Madhusudan Shastri must be set aside, and the lifetimes of the scholars Somadeva, Chaulukabhatta, Shankara, Kripananda, Upamanyu, and others determined afresh; after which we shall show, through examination of the crumbling remains of the fifty-odd works composed by them—*Bodhapradipa*, *Anandasarit*, *Mugdhachaitanyalahari*, and the rest—that in none of these works is there the faintest trace of Galvanic batteries or of Oxygen. In these very works one finds the six-wheel-piercing rite, the snake-charm, and seed-protection formulas; and one scholar has even ventured the view that should

a Brahmin, in a dream, behold his own tail, he must thereupon give land in charity and observe the four-month vow called Kushapatanaka—but of batteries and gases, no description or provision whatsoever is to be found. We shall in due course, through detailed examination of this matter, remove from India the stigma of being without history; we shall prove, from ancient texts alone, plainly and clearly, that in ancient days there were no Galvanic batteries in the land of India, and that no name for Oxygen gas is to be found in the Sanskrit tongue.

2

Refutation of the Above Essay by the Eminent Madhusudan Shastri

Kunjabihari Babu, that mango-tree-dwelling curly-tailed calf of ours—the pied duck of our ocean of Indian history, the buzzing bee of the grove of Bengali literature—has taken up his pen; therefore, ancient India, beware! Who knows where the sting shall land! If a fool possesses the sense of a saw, why should he not feel the urge to strike wood with his own blunted blade! Or rather, it is superfluous to warn ancient India, so far-sighted as it is; better to warn the reckless-penned Kunjabihari himself, who sits there wrapped from head to foot in his sacred upper garment. And so this mango-orchard's tethered calf of ours could not find, in ancient India, the Sanskrit names for Galvanic batteries and Oxygen. Blessed indeed is his devotion to his native land!

Brother Bengali, why should you believe that Galvanic batteries and Oxygen gas were once discovered in this land of ours? Were you to believe it, why should your present state be as it is? Why should you, today—despised, reviled, censured, forsaken by all, without so much as a scrap of clothing, a beggar of beggars, slave upon slave—find yourself in such a plight in this world? Some day you and this pitiful remnant of your literary world will sit and declare: the air of uncivilized India held no Oxygen gas at all, and its unschooled sky knew no such thing as an enlightened firmament capable of playing with lightning.

Brother Bengali, you are Enlightened; you draw in with the air a great deal of Oxygen gas, and lightning flashes in your very eyes and mouth. I am a fool, I am steeped in superstition; therefore, brother, I believe that ancient India possessed Galvanic batteries, and that the existence of Oxygen gas, too, was not unknown. Why do I believe it? First, read with devotion the *Kurma Kalpa* and the *Skanda Purana*; establish faith in the cow and the Brahmin; if you wish to eat the food of

outcastes, do so in secret and deny it before society; forget entirely whatever modern learning you have acquired—then you will understand why I believe. What I tell you today, you will laugh and toss aside; my reasoning will seem to you the raving of an ignorant man.

Yet let me ask once more: is there any reckoning of how much has been devoured by insects, and how much destroyed by the Muslims? That the wicked infidel who destroyed India's sacred freedom should show any tenderness toward India's Galvanic battery—is this even conceivable! Those barbarians who tore away, complete with their sacred topknots, the holy heads of hundreds upon hundreds of Aryan sons—that they should tear away merely the word "Oxygen" from our sacred divine tongue—is there anything so very strange in that?

This, then, was the first argument. The second argument is this: if the ancient names for Galvanic batteries and Oxygen were not effaced by the hand of the infidels alone, then where did they go?—for nowhere is any trace of them to be found. Why is it that among the many hundreds of sages and hermits named in the ancient scriptures, the name of the sage Galban is not to be found despite the most extensive research? In that same sacred India where Dadhichi gave his own bones to Indra for the forging of the thunderbolt, where Bhimasena slew Jarasandha with a blow of his mace, and where the sage Jahnu drank the Ganges in a single mouthful and released her again through his knee—in that India where, even today, the Vindhya mountain bows low in obedience to a sage's command—that from the literature of such a land even the very name of Oxygen gas should have vanished—if the all-destroying ravages of the infidel be not the cause of this, then, O Bengali, what cause, I ask, can there possibly be?

The third argument is this: it has been fully proven by history that the infidels obliterated a great many monuments of ancient India. No one today can deny this. That we are today despised, insulted, timid, terrified, fearful, empty-handed, our glory set like the sun, and subjugated—infidel rule in India is the sole cause of this. If we have conceded so much, then there remains not the slightest reason for hesitation in adding this further point: that the names of our Galvanic batteries and our Oxygen, too, were effaced by those very same villains.

The fourth argument: since at one time the infidels held dominion over India, and indiscriminately shattered countless sacred images and temple-spires; since all

manner of blame may be laid, without difficulty, upon the shoulders of the infidel, with no fear of a libel suit being brought against one for it; therefore, whosoever admits India's poverty in ancient times with regard to any implement of civilization is a wretch, heartless, of a depraved mind, and a traitor to his own land! Therefore his words can carry no value whatsoever; whatever evidence he gathers, no truly steadfast, pious son of Hinduism can ever accept it as evidence at all.

We could offer many more such arguments. But we are Hindus, and there exists in all the world no race so liberal, so tolerant, as ours. We have no wish to interfere with the opinions of others. Therefore our foremost argument shall be: abuse, character-assassination, and the boycotting of washermen and barbers.

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A SAMPLE OF WRITING

To the Esteemed Editor—

Forgive the impertinence, but I cannot refrain from saying it: you gentlemen have not yet learned how to write. Such mild-mannered discourse will not serve; one must seize the reader by the scruff of the neck and drag him along. But since example bears more fruit than precept, our Agency Office is sending you a sample of writing. Should it please you, print it, and do not forget to send the payment. The author is a well-known figure in the world of letters; where exactly in the geography of Bengal this "world of letters" is located, I do not precisely know—this much only I know, that our celebrated author is recognized by none but the members of his own household. It may therefore be surmised that by "the world of letters" he means his widowed aunt, his wife, and his two marriageable daughters. The livelihood of this tiny literary world depends entirely upon our famous author; consequently, were he to write always with regard for taste, for truth, and for propriety, the household could not possibly be sustained. You will not easily find another writer so perfectly suited to the purpose.

Yet why do I say this?

Beholding it, one is struck with astonishment and wonder; what can I say—tears come to the eyes, the urge to weep arises, the breast is flooded with a torrent of tears, when I see, when daily—indeed, when every single day—one witnesses with one's own eyes—what is it that one sees! How, with this accursed mouth, shall I say what is seen! To speak of it brings shame, brings modesty, makes one wish to hide one's face, makes one wish to lift up one's voice and cry aloud: O Mother Earth, O Mother, Mother, Mother dear, split open just once, O Mother—crack apart just once and swallow me, deliver your child from this shame, O Mother! Brother Bengalis, do you understand what disgrace, what humiliation, what unbearable shame I am speaking of, expressing, and, in the very act of uttering it, feeling my throat close up? No, you have no notion—how should you understand, brothers? You know Mill, you know Spencer, you know Shelley's faint half-shadowed, broken-fragment poesy—how should you understand the speech of the poor, how should you listen to the words of the destitute, how should the language of this wretch ever reach your ears? Yet, brothers, I have one question, one thing to ask—wise sirs, I wish to hear but a single answer from those very lips: tell me, brother, you

understand the concerns of others but not the concerns of your own; you understand the affairs of the world outside but cannot comprehend the affairs of your own home; you understand the concerns of him who is not your own—do you not understand the concerns of him who is? If you do not understand, there is no sorrow in that, no grief, not the slightest cause for lamentation; but, brothers, that the matter should fail utterly to penetrate the heart, that one should sit there as though utterly witless!—that indeed is our misfortune, that is our tragic blindness. Brother Bengali, you may well ask: why raise a matter that no one today will understand? Why bring it up at all? Why remind us of what everyone has forgotten? Why strike at a wound that is not unbearable, a pain that is not intolerable, an anguish that scarcely exists? I too say the same thing, brother! Why do I again awaken the echo in this broken temple, in this broken throat! Why do I once more cast tears upon these funeral flames of the cremation ground! Why, in this nineteenth century, in this age ruled and driven by civilization, at the very grave of our Aryan Mother, do I once more stir up the waves of silence! Why do I do it! How should you understand, brothers, why I do it! You who are civilized—how should you understand why I do it! You who, in the new schools of this new civilization, having gained new learning, have taken up new melodies and new songs, have grown intoxicated with new delights, have awakened to new dawns in new ways—how should you understand why I do it! You who have never heard a word of this, and today have utterly forgotten it, you who have never understood a whit of it, and today do not understand it at all—how should you understand why I do it! And yet you ask why I do it? For I, brother, have not read your Mill, have not read your Spencer, have not read your Darwin; I, brother, have not read your Huxley and Tyndall, your Ruskin and Carlyle, and having read them, could not understand them; I, brother, have read only the six systems of philosophy and the eight branches of the Veda, the Samhitas and the Puranas, the Agamas and the Nigamas, the Upakramanika and the first volume of the Rijupatha—these are the only books that I, in all this fallen India, and none other, have read and understood, brother. Yet still you ask why I do it! Dear brothers of my heart, I am mad, deranged, possessed, wind-struck; my head is not right, my reason has lost its steadiness, my mind is utterly distraught!

Brother Bengali, do you now understand why I do it, why unthinking tears fall, why the water of these accursed eyes will not be checked, why I weep uselessly in the

wilderness, why I die weeping in a place where weeping serves no purpose! Has the silent burning of the heart found voice at last? Have you glimpsed the spark of this reduced-to-ashes life? Has the stream of dry tears, in truth, flowed down these two cheeks? Have you heard the echo of a sound never before heard? Have you felt, even a little, the despair of a hope that never found a place in the heart? That which cannot be explained however one tries, and which grows ever more impossible to grasp the more one strives to grasp it—has that, today, found entry into the deafened, civilization-hardened ear-cavity of you people of this nineteenth century?—

Esteemed Editor, this much only could be published today. For in the very next paragraph our author begins: "If it has not been understood, then I am content, I am silent, then I have shut my mouth, then I shall speak not a single word more—no, not one." Having said this, he proceeds once again to explain to Brother Bengali why he will not speak, what result follows from speaking in a cremation ground, what futility follows from speaking at a graveside, what manner of rending of the heart follows from speaking, and what manner of words come forth once the heart has been so rent—and in this he meets with no success whatsoever. This portion is so lengthy that it will not fit within the columns of your paper. Readers may be assured that the essay will shortly be published in book form. The price is a mere five hundred forty rupees; but those who send the said five hundred forty as postage will receive the book as a free gift.

—Manager, Literary Agency

SUBSTANTIAL LITERATURE

Esteemed Editor,

These days, Bengali literature is being flooded with drama upon drama, novel upon novel—yet in them there is not the slightest matter of substance. Neither philosophical wisdom nor moral instruction is to be found in them. What measures might increase the wealth of the nation, what remedies exist for curing disease among cattle, which doctrine—among the theories of causation, causation-in-effect, and pure effect—is superior, whether there exists any difference between the native pumpkin and the foreign pumpkin with regard to the aggravation of phlegm, bile, and wind, which came first between Ashoka and Harshavardhana—on none of these weighty and universally beneficial matters do our countless poetic dramas offer any resolution whatsoever. Imagine, if you will, that in the concluding portion of the fifth act of some drama, one might find set forth a doctrine establishing the mutual relations between biological force and divine force; or that, following the successive stages of the evolution of creation, the acts of the drama might be divided in such a way as to construct a veritable emerald staircase of arduous knowledge ascending act by act—how delighted, how deeply satisfied, would the discerning and sensitive reader then be! At present, the worthless, morally corrupting books now issuing forth are being read by our young gentlemen until they fancy themselves Sahibs, and by the housewives of respectable homes until they fancy themselves memsahibs. With the intention of wiping away this stain upon Bengali literature, I have set myself to compose, under the guise of drama and novel, a number of works replete with wisdom. In the first installment, I have resolved to bring out the almanac itself in dramatic form. The faith of our present English-educated gentlemen and ladies in astrological predictions is steadily declining; it is to restore this lost faith that I have adopted this device. With the aim of capturing the attention of the general public, I wish to publish a small sample of this drama alongside your esteemed and world-renowned journal.

Dramatis Personae of the Play

Hara
Parvati

Act One. Scene: Mount Kailasa

Hara and Parvati

Parvati: My Lord!

Hara: What is it, beloved?

Parvati: I feel an overwhelming desire to hear that delightful account of how many Manus have appeared since the White Boar Age began.

Hara *(smiling)*: Beloved, ever since the almanac's first act of creation, I have, on the first day of every new year down to this very day, satisfied your curiosity in answer to this most worthy question. O life of my life, has your understanding still not settled upon this matter, even now?

Parvati: My Lord, you know well that we women are a witless race, and I, especially, unlike today's memsahib-like ladies, have not attended a "female school." *(One presumes all readers have understood that a sharp jab has here been aimed at the currently educated womenfolk; this should go some way toward discouraging female education.—Author)* O lord of my heart, how should the mind of one whose every waking thought, night and day, is fixed solely upon her husband, retain any memory of the tally of Manus? After all, they are but other men. *(Present-day lady readers will here receive an excellent lesson in wifely devotion.—Author)*

Hara: Beloved, attend then, and hear this delightful matter. Since the White Boar Age, six Manus have passed. The first, Svayambhuva Manu. The second, Svarochisha Manu. The third, Auttami Manu. The fourth, Tamasa Manu. The fifth, Raivata Manu. The sixth, Chakshusha Manu. At present the seventh Manu, Vaivasvata, holds sway. Twenty-seven ages have passed. In the twenty-eighth age begins the Kali Yuga. The total span of the four ages together amounts to twenty thousand and forty-three lakh years.

Parvati *(aside)*: Ah, how delightful to the ear! *(Aloud)* Lord of my life, now determine for me the precise moment of the origin of the Satya Yuga, and thereby soothe this handmaiden's ear-cavity with nectar.

Hara: Beloved, then hear. In the bright fortnight of Vaishakh, on Akshaya Tritiya, a Sunday, occurred the origin of the Satya Yuga. Etc.

(In this manner, with poetic artifice, the first act shall narrate one by one the origin-accounts of the four ages.—Author)

Act Two. Scene: Kailasa

Mahesha seated upon the back of a bull; Hemavati seated upon a rock. For the sake of variety in the drama, the names Hara and Parvati have here been changed, and in the second scene a bull has been introduced. Should this drama ever be performed upon any stage, there will surely be no lack of persons willing to play the bull. In the act that follows, Parvati, through sweet conversation, learns from Maheshwara the forecast for the coming year. In the course of this act, Parvati laments the wretched state of Golden India, and the manner in which the introduction of the railway has brought misfortune upon Aryavarta is skillfully described. The act concludes with a delightful passage concerning the fruits called *Adhakesha*, *Kushabesha*, and *Gotikapata*.

Act Three and Act Four. Scene: Kailasa

Elephant-hide spread out; Dvamvaka and Ambika seated thereupon.

Should the arrangement of an elephant-hide prove impossible in the theatre, spreading a carpet will serve equally well. These two acts contain descriptions of Barvela, Kalvela, Parighayoga, Vishkambhayoga, Asrikyoga, Vishtibhadra, Mahadagdha, star-forecasts, horoscope-forecasts, and the various *karanas*—Bava, Balava, Taitila, Kintughna—along with descriptions of fatal star-conjunctions, remedies for planetary afflictions, and transit-forecasts. The author respectfully requests the actors that, in these two acts, they perform with due regard for accuracy of tone—for if, in the recitation of names such as *Arishtadesha* and *Mitrashadashtaka*, there is no variation in the actor's voice and gesture, the corresponding sentiment will never rise and swell within the hearts of the audience. —Author

Act Five. Scene: Kailasa

Tripurari and Mahadevi seated upon a lion.

(Should a lion not be available, a wooden stool will serve without loss.—Author)

Mahadevi: My Lord, God of Gods, you who know the three times—past, future, and present all lie open before your eye—tell me now, pray, what a certain law of the year 1879 has to say.

Tripurari: O Mahadevi, slayer of Shumbha and Nishumbha, attend then. Should any single matter require the execution of several documents, upon the principal document a regular stamp must be affixed, and upon the others, according to the rate of one rupee each.

Thereupon follows an account of the expense of document registration, the rules regarding tobacco, the fees of pleaders, laws concerning land revenue, income tax, money-order and postal charges, and finally the fare of third-class travel upon the South Eastern State Railway—whereupon the curtain falls.

The actor who is to play the lion in this act may have some slight objection; for it is no easy matter to bear two persons upon one's back and stand motionless upon all fours in the posture of a beast. For this reason, in the midst of the recitation regarding pleaders' fees, the lion shall once roar aloud: "Mother, I am hungry." The Mother shall reply: "Then go, my child, go and hunt your prey in the Sahara Desert; we shall in the meantime descend and take our seats below." Upon all fours the lion shall then make his exit. By this device, the audience will gain some acquaintance with the natural habitat of the lion.—Certain of my well-wishing friends have advised that a touch of comic relief in the manner of Nandi and Bhringi be introduced here and there; but were this done, the dignity of the drama would suffer diminishment. For this reason I have taken great care to exclude altogether any frivolity of that sort. In future I intend to compose the Sushruta and Charaka Samhitas likewise in dramatic form, and I have resolved to offer readers a small sample of how far light literature, in the manner of the novel, may be rendered substantial.

Your most obedient and devoted servant,
Janahitaishi (Well-wisher of the People)

Literary Propagandist

1298

THE VERDICT

Next door to our house stands the house of Nabin Ghosh—so close, indeed, that one might almost call the two a single dwelling.

I myself never climb onto our roof, nor do I ever stand at the window. I go about my household tasks, lost in my own thoughts.

Mukunda Ghosh, the eldest son of that house, I have never once laid eyes upon.

But why must he play the flute! He plays it in the morning, at noon, and again at evening, and the sound carries quite distinctly into my room.

I am no poet, no editor of a monthly journal; I cannot give full voice to what stirs within me. I can only weep in the morning, weep at noon, weep in the evening, and feel the urge to abandon my room and go forth into the world.

Now I understand why Radhika, turning to her companion, cried out in anguish: "Forbid it, O friend—let Shyam's flute sound no more, no more."

Now I understand why Chandidas wrote:

To that land where no house of the flute stands, thither shall I go;
branch and root I shall tear it out and cast it upon the sea.

But reader—have you understood this sorrow of my heart?

ANSWER

I have understood it. Though I am no cloistered wife, for I am, after all, a man—yet beside my own house too there dwells a band of musicians. Among them a certain lad has taken up the flute anew, and from earliest dawn until the middle of the night he labours over his scales.

He has grown a good deal more accomplished than before; now in every note he strays from true pitch by no more than half a tone, or a quarter. But my own mind has grown listless, estranged from everything about me; nothing within these walls can hold my attention.

I understand now why Radhika cried, "Forbid it, O friend—let Shyam's flute sound no more, no more." Shyam, I daresay, was at that very hour practising his own new scales.

I understand now why Chandidas wrote:

To that land where no house of the flute stands, thither shall I go;
branch and root I shall tear it out and cast it upon the sea.

It would seem that beside Chandidas's own lodging, too, there dwelt a band of musicians.

As for the boy who practises beside my house—his name, I have no doubt, is Mukunda Ghosh.

—A Lover of Music

What has become of me! What is this anguish! Sleep have I none, nor appetite, nor peace of mind. Again and again I start up, trembling.

When they fan me with lotus leaves, it becomes unbearable; when they anoint me with sandal paste, it brings not relief but its very opposite.

The cool breeze allays the heat of all the world—only I, luckless creature, cry out to my companion: "Oh—oh, friend, bar the door fast."

When my companions touch me in tenderness, I start and thrust their hands away. I know not by what touch I might find ease.

The lovely autumn moon—to whom does it not bring joy? Why alone does it come to redouble my suffering?

Some other wretched woman, just such as I, must Jayadeva have had in mind when he sang:

She reviles the sandal paste; the moonbeams bring her only restless grief;
the breeze from the southern hills seems to her like poison drawn from serpents' lairs.

And elsewhere he wrote, "Night after night the malady returns and grows"—and such, too, is my case. It is always at night that it worsens.

What has become of me?

ANSWER

You are suffering from rheumatism. You do well, therefore, to bar the door when the east wind rises. As for the sandal paste—by way of experiment, you would do better to forgo it altogether. That your pain increases with the full moon is no peculiarity of yours; it is merely one symptom of the complaint. Between the moon and the ache of longing there exists just such a bond as between the moon and the ebb and flow of the tide.

Like Radhika's, your suffering worsens by night. But in Radhika's day there was no competent physician to be had; in yours, there is no want of doctors. Obtain my address from the editor, and I shall begin your treatment without delay.

—A Newly Qualified Physician

1298 (Bengali Era)

THE HUMILIATION OF THE PAISA

The sahib at our office maintains that the Bengali has no need of high wages. He has settled it firmly in his mind that for the son of a respectable Bengali family, twenty-five rupees a month is handsome pay indeed.

When the sahibs have made up their minds about our circumstances and our country, it would be sheer impudence on our part to offer any opinion of our own. All that remains to us, in the bitterness of our hearts, is to apply to the sahib some epithet suggestive of the most intimate family relation, and murmur among ourselves—the sahib, after all, knows everything.

It is said there exists in this world a law of taking and giving, by which what is wanting in one thing is generally found in excess in another. Proof of it may be found even in our office: just as our pay is meagre, so our labour and our humiliations are abundant—while with the sahib, precisely the reverse holds true.

Yet however delightful this law of the universe may prove for certain of its beneficiaries, it has never struck me as being of much advantage to us. We simply endured it, having no choice. But the day a post above us fell vacant, and a raw young Englishman was brought in from outside to fill it—thereby blocking our own promotion—that day our bitterness knew no bounds.

I felt the urge to fling down my work and walk out then and there, to raise a mutiny, to drive the Englishman from the country, to petition Parliament, to write an anonymous letter to the Statesman. But doing none of these things, I went home instead, refused my evening meal, and—because the baby had caught a cold—subjected my wife to the most excessive reproach; she fell to weeping, and I retired to bed early.

Lying there, I thought: alas, O paisa, for your sake, such humiliation!

My wife, offended, did not come to me; but the goddess of Sleep arrived on silent feet. And suddenly I found myself transformed—into a single paisa.

This struck me as not at all strange. I could not even recall from what venerable mint I had first been struck. This much only I knew: that just as the Shudra sprang from the foot of Brahma, so had we been born from the very lowest tier of the mint.

I had read in the newspaper that a grand assembly of quarter-rupees and two-anna pieces was to convene that day. Having nothing better to do, and moved by curiosity, I rolled myself along to the gathering and took shelter in a corner by the wall.

The delicate quarter-rupee, bearing her devoted companion the two-anna piece tenderly at her side, and troops of pale four-anna pieces came flocking in until the hall was filled.

These coins dwell some in coat pockets, some in leather purses, some in tin boxes; and some, by the strange workings of fate, live out their days as our own neighbours, shut up even within the very same waist-pouch as ourselves.

The matter under discussion that day was this: that they wished to separate themselves entirely from us paisas, on the grounds that we were far too base and low. The two-anna pieces declared shrilly that we were copper-coloured, and that our smell was disagreeable.

Beside me sat a two-anna piece who turned slightly aside and wrinkled her nose; the four-anna piece next to her glared at me with contempt; and I, from sheer mortification, felt myself shrink to no more than a quarter-paisa.

I said to myself: is it not by swallowing eight or sixteen of us that you have come to be worth so much today—and is there not some gratitude owed for that? Beneath the earth, after all, we both held equal rank.

That day it was proposed that separate mints be established for gold-and-silver coin and for copper coin. Though the selfsame Empress's likeness was stamped upon us both alike, they would concede no equality between us on that account. "We shall

not dwell in one waist-pouch, one purse, one box," they declared. Indeed, they wished even to alter that most degrading law by which quarter-rupees and two-anna pieces might be broken into paisas, or paisas gathered into quarter-rupees and two-anna pieces.

"We do not deny the glory of the doctrine of equality," they said, "but it must have its limits. The guinea and the gold mohur may stand in one circle of equality with the quarter-rupee and the two-anna piece—but that these should stand equal with the paisa!"

All cried out together: Never! Never!—the two-anna piece's shrill voice ringing loudest of all.

Longing to sink back into the very mine of my origin, I begged the Earth to cleave open for me; she did not grant my prayer, and I was left standing pressed against the wall, red with shame.

Just then a brand-new, gleaming quarter-rupee rolled into the assembly, and I saw at once that she outshone them all. She began to speak with great vigour, and applause rang out on every side with a jingling clatter.

But listening closely, I noticed that whatever her speech, the ring of her voice was not quite that of true silver. A great suspicion rose in me. When the assembly broke up, I rolled slowly along and, with considerable daring, flung myself against her—there came a dull, homespun clunk, and I caught a smell that was unmistakably our own kind's.

Rising in fury, she cried, "You uncouth wretch, where do you come from!"

"My good fellow," said I, "you and I hail from precisely the same place."

The rascal proved to be our very lowliest kinsman—a half-paisa who had come from somewhere daubed over with mercury.

Seeing his pretensions, I burst out laughing.

Roused by my own laughter, I woke to find my wife lying beside me, weeping. I made my peace with her at once, and, relating the whole affair from beginning to end, said: "What a fine fellow got caught out! But I am thinking I too shall go to the office tomorrow, daubed with mercury."

My wife said it would be better to swallow the mercury outright and die.

1300 (Bengali Era)

A NEW TALE FROM THE KATHAMALA

The Story

Once, several woodcutters were engaged in lopping the branches of a tall pine that grew upon a mountainside. Wishing to lighten their labour, and after much deliberation, they hit upon a novel scheme: several of them climbed up and seated themselves upon the very branch that was to be cut, and there, sitting quietly, began to ply their axes with great care.

In due course the branch broke and fell, and the woodcutters upon it fell with it to the ground and met their end.

Their foreman, hearing this news, hastened in agitation to the foot of the tree, and, brandishing his axe, declared: "For the crime you have committed, I demand justice."

The tree, greatly astonished, replied: "O foremost of men, it was you who climbed upon my own shoulder and severed my own branch. Tell me now, who shall judge whom?"

The man, his eyes red with fury, said: "That my woodcutters should have fallen untimely to their deaths, and no one be punished for it—this can never be permitted."

The tree, now afraid, answered in a trembling, rustling voice: "My lord, whatever clever device those men, in their great ingenuity, chose to employ, they have reaped its fruits with astonishing swiftness through their own skill. I am but a witless tree; I had no power to prevent what followed."

"But it was your branch that broke and fell," said the man. "Of that there can be no doubt."

"That is true," said the tree, "for it was upon my own branch that they struck their axes, and the law of nature admits no exception."

"Then it is you," said the man, with impeccable logic, "who must bear the punishment. Say what you will in your defence—I go now to sharpen my axe."

The Moral

If through carelessness you should stumble, kick the doorsill for your pains. For that senseless piece of wood, this is the only justice it shall ever know.

1298 (Bengali Era)

THE NEW PERIL OF THE ANCIENT GODS

At the meeting, nearly all the gods rose together, each prepared to tender his resignation.

Grandsire Brahma, in the Vedic tongue, with the accents duly raised and lowered and the circumflex correctly joined, declared: "Hear me, hear me, O assembly of gods.

"My own case stands apart. Having completed the creation of the universe and the composition of the Vedas, I gave up all further labour and took my pension. Indeed, since no one expects anything more of me, they have even discontinued my worship altogether. And as for those two compositions of my youth—the Universe and the Veda—people now translate and criticize them freely, each in his own tongue, without the least fear.

"Some say the work is not bad, but might have been very much better; others say that had the correcting of proofs been left to them, there would not have been so many printer's errors, line after line. I keep silent, and say to them only in my own mind: My dear fellows, that was, after all, my very first composition. You have grown far more accomplished than I—but in those days there was no university whatsoever; everything had to be shaped entirely out of my own head. Had you troubled to be born a little earlier, I should have profited greatly from your criticism, and had a fine standard to work from. Unfortunately, you were born far too late. Still, when the second edition is prepared, I shall bear your remarks in mind.

"And then again, some deny outright that those two works are mine at all. They could doubtless prove with ease that the compositions were their own—but refrain, lest it be thought to confess a certain poverty of their own imagination and genius. Hari, Hari! In this whole long life I have committed no wrongdoing beyond those two books—and see how much I must hear of it now!

"Well—so much for my own grievance. But tell me, what sorrow of heart, what grudge against the mortal world, has moved you all to abandon the posts you have held so long?"

Then the gods, some in Vedic speech and some in Puranic, some in the tristubh metre and some in anustubh, taking scrupulous care over every dental and cerebral consonant and every sibilant, replied: "O Lord, a demon named Science has begun the most terrible oppression. Beside him we scarcely count the ancient demons—Vritra and the rest—as worth mentioning at all."

The aged Grandsire smiled to himself, thinking: You have somehow escaped his clutches with dignity intact, and now, of course, can afford to dismiss him as beneath notice—though I recall quite well what a drubbing you took at the time. But without raising the matter, he only shook all four of his heads gravely and said, "Quite so, quite so."

Brihaspati, preceptor of the gods, said: "Noble sir, it is not the enemy we fear so much as our friends, whose meddling has grown intolerable. For so long we dwelt in the heavenly realm of Faith, within the very hearts of men; but now they have struck a secret alliance with Science, and having thereby banished us from that abode, wish to allot us instead some cramped, arid corner within a fold of the skull. There is not a drop of the nectar of faith to be found there. And yet they say: See how greatly your glory has increased! Once you dwelt in the blind cave of the heart; now you have risen to the very crown of the head, illumined by the lamp of knowledge fed on the ghee of the brain! It is fortunate that a few of us are clever fellows, or you would have found no place anywhere, in heaven or on earth. We have proven to everyone's satisfaction that even if you exist nowhere else, you exist at the very least within our scientific explanations. No one clever enough to dislodge you from that position has yet been born. Vishnu's incarnations—the fish, the tortoise, the boar, and the rest—we have proclaimed to be nothing but the Theory of Evolution. Such is the desperate effort we make on the gods' behalf!"

"My Lord, true and heartfelt devotion never resorts to such child's play with its own god. O four-faced one, all this while I have remained a god; now and then, true, the demons' depredations have driven me from heaven—but never until now has

anyone reduced me to a Theory of Evolution! Lord, if it was you who created us, then you alone know what we truly are; but save us now from the hands of those who fancy they have learned a trifle more than yourself. You gave us great hope once, that we gods were immortal—but if our human friends persist, with their perilous affection, in explaining us for much longer, that hope will be dashed entirely."

Hearing all this from Brihaspati, Grandsire Brahma could find no answer, and sat bowing all four white heads, sunk in thought.

Then the gods, one by one, petitioned for a change of office. The wise god Prajapati and the boyish god Kandarpa rose and said: "As all know, we long held some authority in the Department of Marriage; we received no regular offerings or perquisites for it, but the amusement was ample. Of late, however, an upstart deity called the Rupee, wheel-faced, has sprung from the mint in the spotless shape of the full moon, and has, by sheer force, wrested that office from us. Let our names be struck from that department, then, and let this mighty new god's name be entered in our place."

By unanimous consent, it was so resolved.

Then Yama rose and said: "For long I alone was the greatest terror of mortal men; but now there have arisen among them creatures more feared than I. I wish, therefore, to hand my rod of office to the police inspector, and resign from this day."

Though most of the gods felt Yama's complaint not without merit, the matter was grave enough to be held over for final decision at the next meeting.

Kartikeya rose and said: "After our preceptor's speech, I need add little. I am Commander of the divine armies, but I find myself unable to protect the gods any longer. Either abolish my post and reduce the establishment, or hand the defence of heaven over to the editor of some periodical. I am even prepared to give up, free of charge, my peacock of many years—when he spreads his tail, he shall serve them well enough as an advertisement."

With the gods' consent, the post of Commander was abolished, and the peacock's upkeep fell thereafter to his own purse.

Varuna rose, shedding tears, and said: "Is there any further need of me among mortals? Varuni, goddess of the still, has resolved to oust me altogether. I wish to withdraw now, with what dignity remains, while there is time."

After much argument and consultation of the statistics, the gods concluded that the time had not yet come—for even now, weak mortals still turn to Varuna, now and then, to temper the sharp bite of Varuni's spirits.

Then Dharma said: "I had always taken Custom for my subordinate; but since he does as he pleases without consulting me at all, I cede my throne to that upstart entirely."

Vayu said: "Upon the earth, forty-nine winds now blow from forty-nine directions at once; I might well take my retirement."

Aditya said: "Among men a multitude of fireflies has arisen, who believe that even without the sun they may manage well enough by their own light. I will hand the task of lighting the world to them, and retire to rest behind the western hills."

Lord Chandra, assuming the wasted shape of the new moon, said: "Among mortals, poets accord their beloveds' toenails ten times the honour they accord to me; until footwear comes into general use among the ladies celebrated in verse, I shall pass my days in seclusion."

Even Bholanath Shiva, his eyes half closed, said: "There is no want, in this world, of men who smoke more ganja than I; I may hand the office of universal destruction to those reformers, and rest easy—indeed, I know for certain that even my ghosts will no longer be needed."

Last of all, when white-robed Saraswati, seated upon her spotless lotus, rose and began, in a voice sweeter than the vina, to make her petition, the gods sighed, and the lashes of Indra's thousand eyes grew wet with tears.

The goddess said: "Among my other duties, the teaching of children has long rested with me, but this I can no longer continue. I am a woman; some tenderness abides in my heart for children—and the books now chosen for their instruction, I cannot bring myself to teach. My heart is torn, and their small strength is crushed beneath it. This cruel task were better given to some sturdy man. I beg this assembly, therefore, that the burden be laid upon the King of Death."

Yamaraj rose at once in protest: "There is no need of me at all—there are schoolmasters and inspectors quite equal to the task."

On this point—that Yamaraj's appointment to the department of child instruction would be entirely superfluous—the gods found themselves, for once, in perfect agreement.