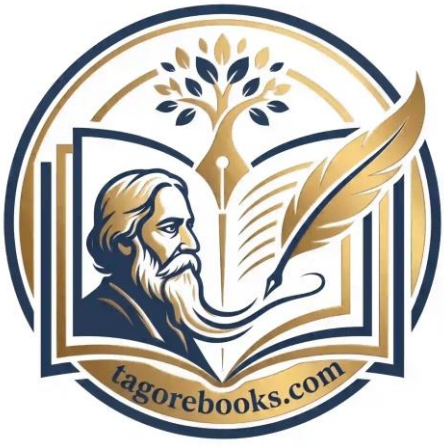
ESSAY

MY BOYHOOD DAYS

(CHHELEBELA)

Rabindranath Tagore



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PREFACE

A request came from Gosainji that I write something for children. I thought I would write of the boy Rabindranath. I attempted to enter that world of the departed past. The measure of its inner and outer dimensions does not match with the present. In the lamplight of those days there was more smoke than illumination. In the realm of the intellect, scientific survey had not yet begun; the boundary-marks of the possible and the impossible lay tangled together. The language in which I have strung together the account of that time has naturally become simple, as far as possible suited to a child's imagining. But as age advanced, and the mists of childish fancy began to clear from the mind, I did not change the language of describing that period—yet the spirit of it has of itself gone beyond childhood. I did not allow this account to overstep the bounds of boyhood—but in the end, this memory has come to stand face to face with adolescence. If one pauses there a moment, one may understand how, through the strange workings of a boy's inner nature, the sudden and inevitable confluence of varied circumstances has gradually ripened into maturity. The particular justification for calling this whole account "boyhood" lies in this: that the growth of a child is the growth of his vital force. In the early stages of life, it is chiefly that current which is worth following. Whatever nourishment agreed of itself with his life, the boy readily absorbed from every side as it came to him. The attempt to shape him into manhood through the prevailing system of education, he accepted, as it were, only in the smallest measure.

Some portions of the subject matter of this book may be found in *Jivansmriti* (Reminiscences), but its flavour is different—like the difference between a lake and a spring. That was narrative; this is poetry. That one showed itself gathered into a basket; this one shows itself still on the tree. Here, along with the fruit, the branches and leaves on every side have been blended together in the telling. Some while ago, certain glimpses of this had appeared in a book of verse—that was its first form. The name of that book was *Chharar Chhabi* (Pictures in Rhyme). In it there was scolding of the half-grown and the grown; and in it the expression of joy was for the most part a child's fancy, wayward and whimsical. This book, however, is written in a child's own idiom of prose.

1

I was born in the Calcutta of the old days. Hackney-carriages went rattling through the city, raising clouds of dust, the rope-whips falling on the bare-boned backs of the horses. There were no trams then, no buses, no motor-cars. Work did not drive men so breathlessly; one could let the day pass at ease. The babus set out for their offices after pulling hard at their tobacco and chewing their paan, some in palanquins, some in shared carriages. The wealthy had carriages of their own, blazoned with crests and half-hooded in leather. On the box the coachman sat with his turban cocked over one ear, and two grooms stood behind with yak-tail whisks tied at their waists. At their cry of "Heiyo!" the foot-passengers started aside as if stung.

For women, going abroad meant the stifling dark of a closed palanquin, and to ride in a carriage was a great shame. Not even in sun or rain might an umbrella be raised over a woman's head. A girl who wore a chemise or shoes was called a memsahib, which meant she had devoured the very head of modesty. If a woman chanced to come upon a strange man, her veil fell down over the tip of her nose with a snap, and she bit her tongue and turned her back. As the doors of their rooms were shut, so were the palanquins in which they went out. Over the palanquins of the daughters and wives of great houses a further thick covering was laid, so that they looked like moving burial-grounds. Beside them walked the doorkeeper, a brass-bound staff in his hand.

The doorkeepers' business was to sit in the gateway guarding the house and stroking their beards. They also saw the money safely to the bank and the women safely to the houses of kinsfolk. On festival days they dipped the mistress of the house in the Ganges, closed palanquin and all. Pedlars came to the door with their boxes set out, and Shiunandan, the doorkeeper, took his small commission. Then there was the driver of the hired carriage, who, if he would not agree to the sharing of the fares, picked a fearful quarrel before our gate.

Our wrestler-jamadar, Sobharam, would flex his arms from time to time, swing his enormous clubs, sit grinding his siddhi, and sometimes munch a raw radish, leaves

and all, in perfect contentment. We would shout "Radhakrishna!" in his ear, and the more he flung up his hands crying "Han, han!", the more our obstinacy grew. That, I suppose, was his stratagem for being made to hear the name of his chosen deity.

In the city there was then neither gas nor electric light. When the kerosene lamp came, we were amazed at its brilliance. At dusk the servants went from room to room lighting lamps of rape-seed oil. In our study there burned a single stand-lamp of two wicks.

By that glimmering light our master taught from Pyari Sarkar's First Book. First came a yawn, then sleep, then the rubbing of eyes. Again and again we were told of the master's other pupil, Satin Sonar, a boy of pure gold, with a marvellous mind for his lessons, who rubbed snuff into his eyes to keep himself awake. And I? It is useless to speak of it. Not even the wretched thought of being the one dunce among all the boys could keep me awake. When nine o'clock struck I would win my release, my eyes heavy with sleep. The narrow passage from the outer quarters into the house was screened with matting, and from above hung a faintly burning lantern. As I walked, something in me whispered that I was being followed, and the skin of my back would creep.

Ghosts in those days lived in tales and rumours, and in the hidden corners of men's minds. Some maidservant would suddenly hear the nasal voice of the ghost of a married woman, and fall in a faint with a thud. That woman-ghost was the most ill-tempered of all, and her greed was for fish. In the western corner of the house stood a thickly leaved almond tree. On one of its branches, with one foot and the other on the cornice of the third storey, a figure was said to stand. There were many who claimed to have seen it, and not a few who believed. When a friend of my elder brother laughed the tale away, the servants thought the man had no religion in him, and that some day his neck would be wrung and he would depart the world. In those days the very air was so thick with the net of terror that if one put one's foot under the table, it shivered.

There was then no water-works. Ungainly porters brought up the Ganges water in pitchers on their shoulders, in Magh and Phalgun, and in a dark room on the ground

floor it stood in rows of great jars, the drinking water of the year. In the lower storey were the damp and sooty cells where, as everyone knew, the ghosts had made their dwelling, with their enormous mouths, their eyes in their chests, their ears like winnowing-fans, and their feet turned backwards. When I passed that shadowy place on my way to the inner garden, my heart pounded, and I wore my feet out in my haste.

At that time the Ganges water came in at the flood-tide along a channel built beside the road. From Grandfather's day a share of that channel's water had been allotted to our pond. When the sluice-gate was drawn, the water poured down in a rushing, gurgling cascade like a mountain stream. The fish turned upside down and showed off their feats of swimming. I would stand gazing with wonder, holding the railing of the southern verandah.

In the end the pond was filled in, and cartloads of rubbish were poured into it. With the pond choked, it seemed as if the mirror lying in the green shade of the village had been taken away. The almond tree still stands, but although it has room enough to stand astride, one can no longer find the address of that Brahmin-ghost.

The light has grown, within and without.

2

The palanquin belonged to the days of our great-grandmothers. It was a very long vehicle, of nawabi fashion. The two poles were measured to the shoulders of eight bearers each. Those bearers wore thick gold rings in their ears and gold bracelets on their wrists, and red-dyed jackets. Like clouds coloured by the setting sun, they had melted away with the old wealth and splendour. On the sides of the palanquin were painted bands of colour, much of them now worn away, and stains had spread everywhere. Tufts of coconut-fibre were poking out of the cushions within. It was like a piece of furniture struck off the roll of the present age, and it lay in a corner of the treasurer's verandah.

I was then seven or eight years old. In the business of this world I had no useful part, and that old palanquin too had been dismissed from every useful service. That was why my heart went out to it so. It was like an island in mid-ocean, and I was a Robinson Crusoe of the holidays. I sat there, hidden in a closed door, escaping the watchful eyes that guarded me on every side.

In those days our house was full of people, kin and strangers past counting. From the different quarters came the cries of the servants calling to one another. Through the front courtyard Pyaridasi came with the day's vegetables on a basket at her shoulder, and two bearers came carrying Ganges water on their yokes. Inside, the weaver-woman had come with saris of the latest border to be bargained over. The goldsmith, who was paid by the month, sat panting in a room beside the lane and attended to the house's orders. Kailash Mukherjee, with a quill pen stuck behind his ear, was being dunned for what was owing to him in the treasurer's office. In the courtyard the cotton-carder sat twanging his bow over the stuffing of an old quilt. Outside, Mukundalal the doorkeeper was grappling with the one-eyed wrestler, trying holds, slapping his thighs with a crack, and doing his twenty-five deep knee-bends one after the other. A party of beggars sat waiting for their allotted alms.

The day wore on, the sun rose hotter, and the bell struck at the gate. But the hours inside the palanquin took no account of the bell. The noon of that place belonged to the old days, when at the lion-gate of the palace the drum of dismissal sounded and the king went to bathe in sandal-scented water. On holiday afternoons those who had charge of me had eaten and gone to sleep. I sat alone. A journey went on within my mind. My motionless palanquin went on its way, and its bearers, made out of air, ate the salt of my fancy. The road was cut by my own whim. Along that road the palanquin travelled through far and far countries, countries whose names I knew from books, names which I myself lent it.

Sometimes its path plunged into a dense forest. A tiger's eyes would glare, and my body would shiver. Beside me sat Bishwanath the hunter. His gun went off with a dum, and all was still. Then at some moment the palanquin changed its form and became a peacock-prowed barge, floating out to sea until the land was lost to sight. The oars began to fall with a plash, plash, the waves rose, swaying and swelling.

The boatmen cried, "Hold fast, hold fast, the storm has risen!" At the helm sat Abdul the boatman, his pointed beard blowing, his moustache clipped, his head bald. I knew him. He used to bring my brother hilsa fish from the Padma, and the eggs of tortoises.

He had once told me a story. One day at the end of the month he had gone fishing in his dinghy, and suddenly a nor'wester broke. It was a fearful storm, and the boat was all but sinking. Abdul seized a rope between his teeth and leaped into the water. He swam to a sandbank and, hauling on the rope, drew his boat after him. The story came to its end so quickly that I did not like it. The boat had not sunk, and he had simply been saved. That was no story at all. Again and again I said, "And then?"

He said, "Then came the real business. Look you, a tiger, lean as a wolf, and such moustaches he had! In the storm he had climbed the pakur tree at the landing-place of the market-town across the river. When the squall struck, the tree broke and fell into the Padma. The tiger went floating down the current.

"Gasping for breath, he came ashore on the sandbank. I saw him, and at once I cast my noose. The beast stood facing me with eyes as big as that. The swimming had made him hungry, and as he looked at me the slaver ran from his red tongue. He had acquaintance with many men, outside and in, but he did not know Abdul. I called out, 'Come, child!' As he lifted his forepaws I slipped the noose round his throat. The harder he struggled to get free, the tighter the noose drew, and out came his tongue."

Hearing so far, I broke in anxiously, "Abdul, is he dead?"

"Dead!" said Abdul. "What does he know of dying, a tiger's son! The river was in flood. I had to get back to Bahadurganj, had I not? I made the young tiger tow my dinghy. We went a good twenty kroshes at the least. He went on grunting and growling, and a prod with the end of my oar sent him along. A journey of ten or fifteen hours I did in an hour and a half. Do not ask me what came after, child. You will get no answer."

I said, "Well and good, so much for the tiger. Now the crocodile."

Abdul said, "I have often seen the tip of his nose above the water. When he lies stretched out on the sloping sandbank, basking, it seems to me he is smiling a most horrible smile. If I had had a gun I could have fought him, but my licence had expired. But there was a fine thing once. A Bede woman was sitting on the bank splitting bamboo with a bill-hook, and her kid was tied beside her. Then the crocodile came out of the river, caught the kid by the hind leg, and dragged it into the water. The Bede woman leaped clean on to his back. With her bill-hook she dealt that demon of a lizard blow upon blow about the throat. He let the kid go and sank under the water."

I said eagerly, "And then?"

"What came after has gone to the bottom of the water, and it will take time to bring it up. When I come again I will send to the sandbank and bring you news."

But he has not come again. Perhaps he has gone to find out.

That was my voyaging inside the palanquin. Outside it, there were days when I played the schoolmaster, and the railings were my pupils. They sat in fear, silent. Each was exceedingly wicked and had no mind for his lessons. I threatened that when they grew up they would have to be coolies. Beaten until their bodies were marked from head to foot, they would still not give up their mischief. How could they? If they stopped, the game would stop.

There was another game, which I played with my wooden lion, Singi. I had heard the stories of the sacrifices at the Puja, and I had resolved that if I offered Singi in sacrifice there would be a great to-do. On his back I had spent a good deal of rage with a stick. A charm had to be composed, or the rite would not be valid:

Uncle Lion, I shall slice thee,
Andibose, I shall dice thee,
Ulukut, dhulukut, dhyam-kur-kur,
Walnut, balnut, khat-khat-khatas,

Pat-pat-patas.

Nearly all of this was borrowed. Only the word walnut was my own, for I was fond of eating walnuts. From the sound khatas you may know that my sacrificial sword was of wood, and the sound patas tells you that the sword was not strong.

3

Since last night the clouds have given no rest, and the rain has come down without ceasing. The trees stand about like dolts, listless. The birds are silent. Today I remember the evenings of my boyhood.

At that time our evenings passed in the servants' quarters. The spelling and meaning-by-rote of English words had not yet settled like a weight upon the neck of the evening. Sejdada used to say that one must first get a firm knot of Bengali, and only after that lay the foundation of English. So when all the scholars of my age at the English schools were tumbling headlong through "I am up, he is down", I had not yet got so far as B-A-D, bad, or M-A-D, mad.

In the nawabi idiom the servants' quarters were then called the toshakhana. Our house, since the days of its splendour, had come down very low, but the names toshakhana, daftarkhana, baithakkhana still clung to the foundations.

In the southern part of the toshakhana, in a big room with a glass-shaded lamp, burned a rape-oil light, flickering. On the walls hung pictures of Ganesh and a likeness of Kali-Ma, and around them lizards hunted insects. There was no furniture, only a dirty mat spread on the floor.

I may as well tell you that our manner of living was like that of the poor. Of carriages and horses there was hardly any talk. In a shed under the tamarind tree at the

corner of the outer court stood one palanquin-carriage and one old horse. Our clothes were wretchedly plain and coarse. It had taken a long time before I was allowed socks. When Brajeshwar's list was got round and bread and butter wrapped in a plantain leaf was allowed us for our refreshment, it was as though the sky had come within my grasp. The great house of former days was being taught to accept its fallen fortune.

The servant who presided over this mat-spread assembly was named Brajeshwar. He was a man with grizzled hair and moustache, his face tight with a skin like dried parchment. He was grave in temper, with a harsh voice, and he drew out his words as he spoke. Before this he had served Lakshmimanta, a master of great name. From there he had come down to the task of looking after careless, ill-brought-up boys such as ourselves. I have heard that he had kept a school in the village pathshala. The schoolmaster's speech and manner stayed with him to the last. When others would say "is sitting", he said "is waiting." The older servants laughed when they heard him.

As was his grave humour, so was his cleanliness. At bathing-time he would go down into the pond and with both hands thrust aside the oily water on the surface five or seven times, and then plunge under. After the bath he would come up from the pond and go along the garden path with his hand crooked in such a posture as if his caste could be saved only if he managed somehow to slip past this vile, accursed world of the Creator's making. He spoke with great emphasis about what was proper and what improper in conduct. His neck was a little crooked, and this lent weight to his speech.

But there was one flaw in all his gravity. Deep within he was a man with a strong greed for food, though he kept it hidden. When we sat down to eat, it was not his custom to have arranged the food in proper portions on our leaves in advance. Instead he would lift up a luchi, one at a time, and hold it dangling, and ask, "Shall I give more?" What answer would please him could be gathered from the tone of his voice. I used often to say, "I do not want it." After that he did not press me further. About the bowl of milk too he was strangely particular, though it was no concern of mine. He had a shelf-almirah in his room. In it was a great brass bowl

containing the milk, and a wooden box with luchis and vegetable curry. A cat's greed went sniffing about outside the net.

Eating so little had become second nature to me from boyhood. I cannot say that I ever complained of the want. The boys who did not stint themselves at table had no more strength than I. My body was so wretchedly well that when a fit of truancy came on me I could not by any violence produce even a trifling ailment. I walked about all day in wet shoes and caught no cold. In the month of Kartik I slept on the open roof with my hair and clothes drenched, and not even a small tickling cough did I get. As for stomach-ache, I never felt a warning of indigestion inside me. I merely told my mother of it when the need arose. Mother, hearing, smiled to herself, and it did not seem that she gave it any thought. Still she would call a servant and say, "Go and tell the master there will be no lessons today." Our mothers of the old days thought: what great loss is it if a boy now and then plays truant from his lessons? A modern mother's hand, if I fell into it, would have meant going back to my master all the same, and a castor-oil dose besides. She might have laughed and made me swallow it. For ever after I was spared the malady. If, by chance, I did have fever, I never saw the physician. The doctor would touch my body and prescribe for the first day castor-oil and fasting. A very little water to drink, and that hot. With it, perhaps, a cardamom. By the third day, the broth of the small maurala fish and soft rice after the fast was nectar.

I cannot recall what it is to suffer from fever. The word malaria was not yet heard. The king of all nauseating medicines was that oil, but I do not remember quinine. The lancet of the surgeon never scratched me. Measles and chicken-pox I have not known to this day. My body was altogether, in its way, sound. If mothers want their sons' bodies to be kept so free of disease that the master's hand can be avoided, they will have to seek out a servant like Brajeshwar. With the cost of food he saved the doctor's fees, particularly in the days of this machine-ground flour and this adulterated ghee and oil. One thing should be remembered: chocolate had not yet appeared in the market. There was a pice-worth of rose-pink rewri. Whether that lump of sugar, covered with sesame and scented with roses, still makes the pockets of boys sticky I do not know. Surely it has fled in shame from the houses of respectable folk. Where has that paper cone of roasted spices gone? And that cheap sesame gaja? Does it still survive? If not, there is no need to bring it back.

In the evening, from Brajeshwar, day by day, I heard Krittibas's Ramayana, the Seven Cantos. Into the midst of this reading Kishori Chatterji would now and then drop in. He knew by heart the whole Ramayana panchali, tunes and all. Suddenly he would take possession of the seat, push Krittibas aside, and rattle off his own portion of the panchali at full speed. "O Lakshmana, what ill omen is this! Calamity has struck indeed!" His face smiling, the tuft of his hair shaking, there flowed from his throat the rippling music of the rhymed lines, and at every step the chiming of the words was like the sound of pebbles beneath running water. With it went the swaying of his hands and feet in gesture. Kishori Chatterji's greatest regret was that "Dadabhai," that is to say, I, with such a throat as mine, could not be enlisted in the panchali troop. Had it been possible, I might have had some name in the land.

When night came on, the gathering on the mat broke up. With the fear of ghosts pressing upon my spine, I went into the inner part of the house, to my mother's room. Mother would be playing cards with her younger aunt. The room, with its fine fretwork, gleamed like ivory, and there was a great wooden couch spread with a jajim. I would make such an uproar that Mother would put down the cards and say, "If you plague me, go, Khuri, and tell them a story." We washed our feet in the water of the verandah jar, drew Didima to bed, and clambered on to the bed ourselves. There began the tale of the awakening of the princess from the sleep of Daityapuri. In the middle of it, who was to break my own sleep? In the first watch of night the jackals rose crying. Even then the cry of jackals rang out at night from beneath the foundations of some of the old houses of Calcutta.

4

When we were small, Calcutta in the evenings was not so wakeful as it is now. In our day, when the daylight of the sun is done, the day of electric light begins. At that time the city had less work, but it had no rest. It was as if the burning wood in the hearth had gone out, yet fire still lingered in the charcoal. The oil-presses did not run, the steamer-whistles were silent, the troop of mill-hands had gone out from the factories, and the buffaloes that had hauled the jute bales had gone under

tin roofs in the city's cowsheds. All day the head of the city had seethed with fire, with its manifold cares, and even now its veins still throbbed. On both sides of the road, buying and selling went on as before, but they were somewhat smothered, as under ashes. Carriages for taking the air, with all manner of noises, ran off in ten directions, but behind their rush there was little of the pressure of urgent need.

In our age, when the day was over, the surplus of the day's affairs lay down silently beneath the black blanket of night, on the ground floor where the city's lamps had been put out. Within doors and without, the evening sky trembled and throbbed. In the Eden Gardens by the Ganges one could hear from the road the "Hai! Hai!" of the grooms in the carriages taking out the fashionables for air. In the months of Chaitra and Baisakh, the street-hawker went crying "Barif!", ice, water-ice carried in small tin moulds, which was then called kulfi's baraf and now is called ice or ice-cream. I alone know what that cry did to my heart as I stood by a verandah on the street. And I do not know why the old cry of "Belphul!", the flower-sellers' baskets of jasmine, is heard no more. In those days from the topknots of the girls in the house the scent of garlands of jasmine drifted away on the wind. Before going to bathe, the women sat before the room with a mirror in front of them and put up their hair. The twisted hair-ropes were made into topknots in a variety of fashions. They wore saris of Farasdanga with black borders. The barber's wife used to come with pumice to scrub their feet and dye them with red lac. [The source is corrupt here; the sense is that there were not yet crowds clinging to the footboards of the trams, nor throngs rushing to the football-grounds, nor crowds before the doors of cinemas at closing-time.] A fondness for dramatic performances had begun to appear, but what more can I say? We were, in that age, only children.

In those days the pleasures of the elders were such that the boys could not claim a share, even from far off. If we had the temerity to go near, we heard, "Go and play." Yet if the boys made a proper racket in their play, we heard, "Be quiet." And the revels of the elders were not always carried on in silence. Therefore from afar some drops of it fell upon us, as the spray of a waterfall falls. Leaning over the verandah of the house I would gaze down, and the ballroom was all glowing with light. In front of the gate, great carriages drawn by pairs had come and stood in crowds. From the main door, some of the elder brothers would go forward and conduct the

guests inside. From the rose-sprinkler they scattered rosewater on their clothes, and into each guest's hand they put a little nosegay.

Sometimes the sobbing of a high-born girl in a play reached my ears from the stage, and I could not understand its meaning. A strong desire arose in me to understand. I got to hear that the lady who wept was of Kulin birth, to be sure, but in fact she was my sister's husband.

In the families of that day, as women and men stood at the two poles of the household, so did the small and the great. In the drawing-room, by the light of chandeliers and lanterns, the dancing and singing went on, and the elders pulled at their hubble-bubbles. The women sat hidden behind the screen on the far side, in the dim light, with their paan-boxes, and the women of the outer circle came and gathered there, and the news of the neighbours went round in whispers. The boys by then were in bed. Piyari or Shankari was telling us stories, and there came to my ears:

"The moonlight blooms like flowers—"

5

Shortly before our time, it was the fashion among the wealthy to put on amateur jatra, or folk-plays. There was a rage for choosing boys with sweet voices and forming a troupe. My Mejokaka was the leader of one such amateur troupe. He had the power to compose plays, and zest for training boys. Just as the wealthy had their amateur jatra kept at home, so Bengal had a great passion for the professional plays. In one quarter and another there would spring up, under some renowned master, a troupe of players. Those masters were not all of a caste that was exalted or learned. They had made their names by their own abilities.

At our house there were performances now and again. But there was no way for me, a child. I did manage to see the preparations behind the scenes. The whole troupe had settled down all along the verandah, and the smoke of tobacco rose on

every side. The boys had long hair and darkened eyes, and their faces, at so tender an age, had already ripened. Their lips had turned black with chewing paan. The costumes and properties were in painted tin boxes. The gate stood open, and the courtyard was pouring full of people. On every side the drums gave out their throbbing sound, and it spilled out through the lanes into the Chitpur Road.

When it was nine o'clock at night, like a hawk upon the back of a pigeon, there suddenly came Shyam. He caught my elbow in his hard fist and said, "Mother is calling. Come, let us go to bed." Before everyone, this hustling and dragging bowed my head, and I went in defeat to the bed-chamber. Outside went on the shouting, outside the chandeliers burned. In my room there was no sound but the guttering of the brass lamp upon its stand. Now and again, through the heavy mist of sleep, I heard the clash of cymbals as the dance came to its beat.

To forbid everything is the religion of the elders. But once, for some reason, their hearts were softened and the order went out that the boys too might hear the jatra. It was the play of Nala and Damayanti. Before it began, I lay on my bed till eleven at night, asleep. Again and again I was assured that when the time came we should be woken. I knew the ways of those above us and did not believe it for a moment, since they were grown-up and we were small.

That night I dragged my sleep-laden body to bed. For one reason, Mother had said she would wake me herself. For another, to keep myself awake past nine would have taken a great deal of pushing and shoving. At one point I was roused from sleep and brought outside. My eyes were dazzled. On the ground floor and the first, the light of the coloured chandeliers streamed down in glimmers on every side, and the courtyard, spread with a white sheet, loomed in my eyes immense. On one side sat the masters of the house and those who had been invited. The rest of the space had been filled by whoever pleased, from wherever he pleased. To the theatre there had come a party of renowned men with gold chains dangling from their waists, and in the jatra circle high and low were crowded together. Most of them were common men, whom the gentlemen call riff-raff.

The play had been written by hands hardened by rough pens, who had never made copies from English copy-books. Its tunes, its dances, its tales had been begotten in

the markets, the ghats, and the fields of Bengal, and its language had never been polished by the pandit-master. In the assembly, when I sat down beside my elder brothers, they tied a few rupees in a handkerchief and gave it into our hands. It was the custom to throw those coins at exactly the right place, to applaud. It was an extra gain for the players, and the householder's good name.

The night ended, and the jatra did not wish to end. Somewhere in the midst of it, someone carried my sleep-fallen body away. I could never find out whom. If I had known, what shame! A man who has sat with the elders in the front row, flinging his tips, to be so humiliated before the whole courtyard of men! When I awoke, I found myself lying on Mother's couch. It was very late, and the sun was glaring. The sun had risen and I had not. It never happened again.

In the city nowadays amusements flow like the current of a river. There is hardly a gap in it. Every day, everywhere, there are cinemas, and whoever likes may go in at small cost. The jatra of former days was like digging in the sand of a dry river-bed every krosh or two to draw out water. Its duration was a few hours. The passer-by on the road would come upon it suddenly, take a handful of water, and quench his thirst a little.

The earlier age was like a prince. At times, at festivals, when his fancy took him, he scattered gifts through his domain. The present age is a pedlar's puppet, which sits at the crossroads of the main street with every kind of glittering ware displayed. Custom comes from the big road, and from the small roads too.

6

Chief of the servants was Brajeshwar. Second to him, in rank if not in age, was Shyam. His home was in Jessore, a true villager of the soil, and his speech was not that of Calcutta. He would say, "Tenara, onara" for "they," and "it will be khati" for "pure," and talk of lentil-broth and sour jujube. "Domani" was his word of endearment. He was dark, with big eyes and long hair gleaming with oil, and a strong, broad body. In his nature there was nothing harsh. His mind was clear and

simple. He had a tenderness for boys. From him we heard stories of dacoits. As the fear of ghosts then filled men's minds, so tales of dacoits filled the house, in every room.

Dacoity, even now, is not less common. There is murder, there is wounding, there is plunder, and the police do not lay hands on the right man. But that is news, and there is no joy of a tale in it. The dacoity of those days rose up into stories, and was carried from mouth to mouth for many years. When we were born there were still men to be seen who in their prime had belonged to dacoit bands. They were great lathi-wielders, and with them went the masters of lathi-play. Men saluted them at the very mention of their names. Dacoits were not then, in the main, vulgar cut-throats like village ruffians. They had stout hearts, and generous minds. On the other side, the gentry's houses also had their lathi-schools. The dacoits themselves honoured those who had made a name as masters, and gave a wide berth to their territory.

For many zamindars dacoity was a business. I have heard of one zamindar who kept a band hired at the river-mouth. One night of the new moon, on the night of the Puja, when they brought a severed head to the temple of Kali, the Skeleton Mother, the zamindar struck his brow and cried, "Why, this is my own son-in-law!"

We heard more of the dacoits Raghu and Bishu. They gave warning before they came and did not rob by stealth. From afar, the blood of the village ran cold at the sound of their shout. It was against their religion to lay hands upon women. Once, a woman dressed as Kali, with a sacrificial sword in her hand, had turned the tables and exacted tribute from the dacoits.

One day a display of dacoits' feats was shown at our house. They were huge, dark-skinned fellows with long hair. One tied a cloth round a rice-pounder, took the cloth in his teeth, and flung the pounder over his back. Another, with matted hair, whirled it about till people swayed. One, leaning his weight on a long lathi, leapt up to the second storey. Another slipped out like a bird through the gap between two hands. They showed how, after finishing a dacoity ten or twenty miles away, a man might that very night return home and lie in bed like a good citizen.

Between the two ends of a very long pair of lathis was fixed a piece of wood to rest the foot upon. This kind of lathi was called rangpa, the stilt. If one held the ends of the two lathis in one's hands and walked with one's feet planted on the footholds, every step was ten steps long, and one went faster than a horse. Although I had no thought of dacoity in my head, I tried once, in Santiniketan, to introduce this walking on stilts among the boys. How many evenings have I whiled away, clutching my ribs in both hands, fitting this picture of the dacoity-play into Shyam's tales!

It was a Sunday holiday. The evening before, the crickets had been chirping in the thickets of the southern garden outside, and the tale had been of Raghu the dacoit. In the dim light of the room, where the shadows shivered, my heart had throbbed. The next day, in the gap of the holiday, I climbed into the palanquin.

It began to move without moving, to an unknown destination, so that my mind, snared in the web of the story, might be given a taste of fear. In the veins of the sleepless darkness the bearers' "Hai-hui! Hai-hui!" seemed to beat out a rhythm, and my body shivered. The open field stretched, dhu-dhu. The wind trembled in the sun. In the distance the water of the Kalidighi flashed. The sand creaked. On the edge of the bank, leaning down toward the cracked old ghat, was a spreading pakur tree with tangled branches.

The terror of the story lay gathered in the unknown field, under the tree, among the thick reed-beds. The nearer I came, the more my heart went pit-a-pat. One or two ends of bamboo lathis showed above the thicket. The bearers were to change shoulders there. They would drink water, and wind their wet cloths about their heads. And then?

"Re re re re re re!"

7

From morning to night the grinding of the mill of lessons went on. The task of keeping this machine in motion lay in the hands of my Sejdada, Hemendranath. He

was a stern ruler, like the strings of a tanpura, which, if you draw them too tight, snap with a twang. Of all that he wished to make us understand, a good part has been overturned and sunk like a dinghy, and there is no hiding it now. My learning was a dead loss. Sejdada began to train up his eldest daughter, and in due time put her to school at Loreto. Before that she had won her first mastery over Bengali.

He gave her talent a thorough training in English music, though I do not know that in doing so she was made to forget the way of native song. In the families of that day, in the singing of Hindustani songs, she had no equal.

The virtue of English music is that the tune is kept very pure, the ear is disciplined, and under the rule of the piano even the time does not slacken.

On the other side, there was Bishnu. Native songs had been begun in me from infancy. I too was enrolled in this school of song. The songs with which Bishnu made me begin were such as no famous ustad of today would deign to touch, for they lay in the lowest depths of the village-ballad. I give one or two specimens.

There was once a Bede girl,
Came to the village,
To tattoo a pretty design.

And when the tattoo was done,
What a conjurer's spell was spun,
O sister-dear!
How I wept for the tattoo's smart,
O sister-dear!

Some more half-torn lines come to mind. For example:

Moon and sun have owned defeat,
Fireflies light their lamps,
Mogul and Pathan are done,
Weavers read Persian.

O mother of Ganesh, vex not the plantain-bride;
When she bears one blossom, her brood will be great.

And there are lines of a very ancient flavour, the sweetness of old-time news that has been forgotten:

There once was a dog's-tongue weed,
A forest of jackal-thorn;
He cut it down and made a throne.

Today's rule is that the harmonium is brought first, to set the tune with sa re ga ma, and only afterwards do they go on to light songs in Hindi. At that time he who supervised our studies had understood that a boy's own things belong to his own mind, and that light Bengali speech finds a lodging in the mind more easily than Hindi lines. Besides, the native measure of this metre needs no tabla and bayan. It dances of itself in the pulse, heedless of the drummer's syllables. [The source text of this paragraph is garbled; the sense is that the nursery rhymes from the mothers' lips were the first lessons in literature, and that the teaching of beguiling songs began with those same rhymes.]

At that time the harmonium had not yet come to ruin the caste of the music of this country. With a tanpura on my shoulder I practised my songs. I never became a slave to a tune cut and shaped by a machine.

My fault is that on the road of learning nothing could keep me going long. As I pleased, I scraped together and gleaned whatever came to hand, and filled my bag with it, and gave it away.

If studying with the whole mind had been in my nature, the ustads of today could not have scorned me. The opportunities were many. As long as Sejdada was the head of our instruction, I droned Brahmo hymns at Bishnu's side in a half-hearted way. Sometimes, when my mind began to stir by itself, I gathered up songs by standing beside a door. When Sejdada, in the raga Behag, was singing out "Ati-gaja-gamini re," I used to take the impress of it secretly in my mind. In the evening to astonish my mother by singing that song for her was easy.

A friend of our house, Shrikantha Babu, lived day and night steeped in song. Sitting on the verandah he would rub on chameli oil to bathe, with his hubble-bubble in his hand and the scent of amburi tobacco rising to the sky, humming softly all the while, and drawing the boys round him on every side. He did not teach songs. He simply gave them, and when I picked them up, I could not tell. When his joy overflowed, he would stand up, swaying, and play on his sitar, and his great eyes flashed in his laughter, and he began:

Moy chhoro Braj-ki basari...

And I could not go free unless I sang along with him.

The hospitality of those days was an open door. There was no need to inquire into acquaintance. Whoever dropped in at a given time found a place to sleep, and plates of rice came duly. One day an unknown guest of that kind, with a patched-up tanpura on his shoulder, opened his bundle and stretched out his legs in one corner of the sitting-room. Kanai, the hookah-bearer, handed him the hookah as custom required.

In that age, tobacco for guests and paan went together. In the inner apartments, the morning business of the women was the making of paan, heap upon heap, for those who came to the outer room. Lime was swiftly smeared on the leaf, catechu and spices put in due measure, the whole folded with cloves, and stacked in brass bowls, covered with a damp cloth sprinkled with catechu. On the other side, in the room beneath the outside stair, the preparing of tobacco was in full swing. In earthen bowls, the gul lay covered with ash, and the pipes of the hubble-bubbles hung like the snakes of the snake-charmers, with the scent of rosewater in their veins.

Those who came to the house, as they mounted the stairs, were greeted in the fragrance of the amburi tobacco with their first "Pray come in, sir." In those days there was this fixed rule of welcoming a man. That bowl-filled abundance of paan has long since gone, and the caste of hookah-bearers has laid aside its dress, and in the sweetmeat-shop three-day-old sandesh is being smeared on with relish.

That unknown singer stayed on for some days as he pleased. No one asked him questions. At dawn we dragged him out of his mosquito-net and listened to his songs. Those who have no discipline for learning by rule have a taste for learning without it. In the morning his voice went forth in "Bangshi humari re."

Later, when I had grown somewhat older, a very great ustad, Jadu Bhatta, came and settled in the house. He made one huge mistake. He insisted upon teaching me songs, and so no song was learnt. A few I gathered by stealth. I liked the song in the raga Kafi, "rum-jhum barakhe, aaju badarwa," and it remains with me still, bound up with my songs of the rains. The difficulty was that about this time another guest arrived, saying nothing. Tiger-killer was his title of fame. This, for the Bengali, that a man should kill a tiger was strange to hear that day, and so most of my time was caught in his room. Telling us that he had fallen into the clutches of a tiger, he sent a thrill through our breasts, but the tiger in whose power he claimed to have fallen had never bitten him. He had conjectured the story of the bite from the gaping mouth of a dead tiger in a museum. I did not think of it then. I see it plainly now. Even so, in those days I was busy furnishing paan and tobacco, one after another, for that hero. From afar, at times, the strains of the kanara reached my ears.

So much, then, for song. The foundation of my other learning, which was laid by Sejdada's hands, was also on a grand scale. It bore no special fruit, through a fault in my nature. It was with a man such as me in mind that Ramprasad Sen said, "O mind, you know not the art of husbandry. The field has never been tilled." Let us now give some account of which fields the furrow was cut in.

While it was still dark I rose from bed and put on my wrestling dress. In winter, shivering, my skin rose in goose-flesh. There was in the city a famous wrestler, a one-eyed man, who trained us in wrestling. North of the hall was a clear plot of ground, called the Golabari. From the name it can be understood that the city had not yet pressed the village wholly down, and some gaps remained. In the early days of the city our Golabari used to store up in its granary the paddy of the year, and the tenants of the waste land paid their share of the paddy. Hugging this wall was the wrestling-shed, thatched. They dug into the ground a cubit deep, loosened the earth, and poured in a maund of mustard oil to make the ring. There my wrestling

bouts with the wrestler were only a boy's play. After smearing myself thickly with earth, at length I used to slip a shirt over my body and come in. Mother did not like me to come in every morning so smeared with earth. She feared that the colour of her son's body would rub off and he would grow pale. The result was that on holidays she would set to scrubbing me. In our day the fashionable ladies buy their readymade soaps from English shops, but then they made their own scrubbing-pastes with their own hands. They were made of almond paste, cream, lemon peel, and I know not what else. If I had known and remembered them, I might have set up business under the name of Begum's Delight, and earned more than the sweetmeat-shop.

On Sunday mornings, seated on the verandah while the grinding and rubbing went on, my mind grew restless for its holiday. Meantime, there was a rumour current among the school-boys that in our house infants, as soon as they were born, were dipped in liquor, and that this was why their complexion took the lustre of the Sahibs.

When I came back from the wrestling-ring, I found a student of the Medical College sitting there to teach me the science of knowing the bones of man. There hung on the wall an entire skeleton. At night it hung on the wall of our sleeping-room, and in the wind the bones rose and rattled khat, khat. By handling them again and again, I came to know all the hard names of the bones, and thereby the fear was broken.

At the gate the clock struck seven. Nilkamal Master's time was kept to the minute. A minute's difference was an impossibility. His body was frail and sickly, yet his health, like that of his pupil, was never in want. Not for a single day did the chance of a headache offer itself. With book and slate I went to the table. On the black-board, in chalk, the marks of sums went on appearing, all in Bengali: arithmetic, algebra, geometry. In literature we jumped from Sita's Exile to the epic Meghnad-badh. With them was a study called Natural Science.

Sometimes there came Sitanath Datta, and from him were obtained little scraps of scientific lore, by testing familiar things. Once Heramba Tarkaratna came. Without understanding anything, I began to learn Mugdhabodh by rote. So all morning long, in proportion as the pressure of lessons of every sort fell upon the mind, the mind,

in its hidden recesses, began to steal away a bit of understanding here and a bit there. It made a gap in the net and let the memorised learning slip through. And as for the opinions on his pupil's intelligence which Nilkamal Master kept passing, they were not such as one would call in five outsiders to hear.

At another side of the verandah an old tailor, with spectacles of glass, sat bent over, sewing clothes. Now and then, when the hour came, he stopped to say his prayers. Looking at him, I would think what a comfortable lot was his. When my head began to swim over sums, I put the slate over my eyes like a screen, and looked down and below. In front of the gate sat Chandrabhan, combing his long beard with a wooden comb and drawing it out in two halves over his ears. Beside him sat a bracelet-wearing, bashful young doorman, pounding tobacco. There the horse had finished its allotted grain at the first hour, and the sparrows, leaping and hopping, were pecking at the scattered grain. And Johnny the dog's sense of duty awoke, and he went barking and chasing them away.

In a corner of the verandah, in a heap of dust gathered by the broom, I had buried a mango-stone. I wished to see when its tender leaves would come forth, and my mind fretted. As soon as Nilkamal Master had gone out, I ran to see it and to give it water. In the end my hope was not fulfilled. The same broom that had once heaped up the dust scattered it again.

The sun rises higher, and half the courtyard is shaded. Nine o'clock strikes. Black Gobinda, with a turmeric-coloured towel on his shoulder, comes to take me to my bath. At half-past nine comes the day's allotment of dal, rice, and fish-curry. I have no appetite for it.

Ten strikes. From the main road comes the heart-saddening cry of the seller of green mangoes. A pot-seller goes by with a tinkling, from afar to afar. On the roof of a house at the lane's edge the eldest daughter-in-law dries her wet hair in the sun, and her two girls are playing with cowries and no one is hurrying them. Girls at that time were under no pressure to go to school. It seemed to me that to be born a girl was merely a piece of good luck. The old horse draws the palanquin-carriage with me in it to my ten-to-four transportation to the Andamans. At half-past four I come back from school.

The gymnastics master has come. For about an hour I turn my body upside down on the wooden bar. Before he has gone, in comes the drawing-master.

Little by little the day's spent light melts away. Out of the heavy rustling of the city's mixed noises, a dream-tune is struck in the body of the brick-and-timber giant.

In the study the oil lamp is lit. Aghor Master arrives. English reading begins. The black-covered Reader lies in wait on the table. Its cover is loose, its pages torn, some soiled, and in some unspecified place I have, with hands stiffened by effort, written my name in English, every letter a capital. As I read I fall asleep, and, falling asleep, I start awake. More than all I read was what I did not.

When I get into bed, at last I find a little scorched time. There I listen, and the story never comes to an end, for the prince goes on across the Tepantar Moor.

8

I can understand clearly the difference between that age and this when I see that nowadays the roofs of our houses have neither the coming and going of men nor the presence of ghosts. I have already said that, unable to survive in an atmosphere of excessive study, the Brahma-Daitya has taken to flight. On the cornice of the roof, where there was talk of his resting his feet in comfort, the crows now fight over mango-stones. Meanwhile the dwelling of man has been reduced to a packing-case of four-cornered walls on the ground floor.

I remember the roof within the house, ringed by its walls. In the evenings Mother sat on a mat, and her companions sat about her telling stories. In those stories there was no need of exact news. All that was needed was to pass the time. The time of those days had no need of stuffing with goods of various prices. The days were not tightly woven, but were like a net with great gaps in it. Whether in the men's assemblies or in the women's, gossip, laughter, and merriment were of very light value. Among Mother's companions the chief was Braja Acharji's sister, who

was called Mrs. Acharji. It was her daily business to gather and furnish news for this assembly. Mostly she brought outlandish news from all the realm, collected or concocted. For that reason the expense of planetary propitiations and ritual was always heavy. In this assembly I sometimes imported learning from the books I had read, telling them that the sun is ninety millions of miles from the earth. I recited from Rijupath, Part II, and even a piece of Valmiki's own Ramayana, anusvara and visarga and all. Mother, who did not know how pure her son's pronunciation was, was nevertheless struck by the reach of his learning. Who could have known that these verses were fit to be heard only from the lips of Narada himself?

This roof was in the possession of the women, and it was in touch with the store-room. The sun there fell in full, and the lemon pickles were left to ripen. There the women sat with brass bowls full of ground black-gram paste, and with deft little pats made the dried dumplings called bori, drying their hair as they did so, while the maids spread out the washed old clothes in the sun. In those days the washing was lighter work. Green mangoes were cut into slices and dried into amsi, and black stone moulds carved with patterns of every size had the mango juice set into them layer by layer. The pickle of raw jackfruit grew savoury in the sun with mustard oil. The keya-khayer was made with great care, and it was this I remember most. When the pandit at school informed me that he had heard of the name of our house's keya-khayer, I could not make out the meaning. Whatever he had heard, it was needful that he should know. And so, to keep up the good name of the house, I would now and then secretly climb the roof and steal two or three pieces of the keya-khayer. I should say rather that I abducted them, for kings and emperors themselves, when need arises, and even when it does not, carry off what they wish. It is only those who steal that they send to prison or impale.

In winter, sitting on the roof in the warm raw sun to tell stories, the women had also a duty of driving off crows, and so passing the time. In the house I was the sole Dewar, the husband's younger brother, and my office was to guard my sister-in-law's dried mango-pulp, besides five other humble services of that kind. I read aloud to them the novel Bangadhip Parajay. Sometimes the task fell to me of cutting the betel-nut with a nutcracker. I could cut it very fine. As for any other quality that I had, my sister-in-law would not acknowledge it, not even the shape of my face, in which she found fault, laying her blame upon the Creator. But in

praising the skill of my betel-nut-cutting hand my tongue did not stumble. The work of betel-cutting went briskly. For lack of anyone to egg me on, I have long since turned that hand, which was so skilled in fine cutting, to other fine work.

These girlish tasks, of drying and sunning on the roof, gave a flavour of the village. They belonged to the time when the house still had its rice-husking shed, when the coconut-sweets were pounded, when at evening the maidservants sat twisting lamp-wicks upon their thighs, and when summons came from the neighbour's house to the feast of Atkaudi. Fairy-tales the boys cannot hear nowadays from the mouths of the girls; they read them in printed books for themselves. Pickles and chutneys must now be bought from the New Bazaar, in bottles, sealed in with lac.

There was another stamp of the village in the neighbourhood, and that was the Chandimandap. There the guru-mashai's school was held. Not only the boys of our own house, but also the children of the neighbourhood, first had their lessons begun there, on palm-leaf. I too must surely have begun there, tracing over the letters "swara-a, swara-aa," but that child is like the farthest planet of the solar system, and is not to be seen by any telescope of the memory.

After that, the first I remember of reading is the dreadful affair of the school of Shashthi-mark Muni, and the tearing open of Hiranyakashipu's belly by the Man-Lion incarnation. In that book I saw even a picture of it, engraved upon a plate of lead. And now come back to my mind some verses of Chanakya.

In my life the open roof was chiefly the country of holidays. From small to grown-up years, my different days passed on that roof, in different ways. When my father was in the house, his place was in the room on the third floor. Standing behind a louvred window, many a day I watched him from afar. The sun had not yet risen, and he sat silent on the roof like a figure of white stone, his two hands folded in his lap. Sometimes he went away for many days to the hills and mountains, and then going up to that roof was to me the joy of crossing seven seas. From the verandah below, through the gaps in the railing, I had been looking all my life at the people passing along the road. But to pass beyond the thronging dwellings of men and to reach that roof was another matter. There, as I walked, I seemed to walk over the head of Calcutta, where the last blue of the sky mingled with the last green of the

earth. The roofs of many houses, high and low, of various shapes, met the eye, and here and there was a glimpse of the tousled head of a tree.

I climbed secretly to the roof, mostly in the noon. All my life this noon-hour has caught my mind. It is as though in the day it were the evening, the hour when a boy-ascetic becomes a wanderer. I opened the door-latch through the chink of the louvres. Straight in front of the door stood a sofa, and there, utterly alone, I sat. The guards who were set to catch me had eaten their fill and were drowsy, and had stretched themselves out to sleep on mats. The sun turned red, and a kite called in the sky. Along the lane in front the bangle-seller went. The silent noon of that day is no more, and no more is the bangle-seller of that silent noon.

Where his cry reached, the wife of the house, lying with her loosened hair spread over the pillow, would call a maid to fetch him within, and the old bangle-seller, taking her hand and pressing it gently, would slip on the bangles of her choice. That young wife of those days has not even yet received the privilege of the veil, being at this moment in the second-year class, studying. And that bangle-seller perhaps pushes a rickshaw in that same lane today. The roof was my desert of book-learning, parched in the four directions. A hot wind rushed along, raising the dust, and the blue of the sky came faded.

In the desert of that roof an oasis once appeared. Today there is no water-tap on the upper floors. But in those days it was within reach of the third-floor room. It was a hidden bathing-place, tucked away, as if the Livingstone of Bengal had just found it. I would open the tap, and a stream would fall over my whole body. I wiped myself with a sheet from the bed, and sat down as an ordinary man.

The day of the holiday drew toward its close. At the gate below, four o'clock struck. The Sunday afternoon sky wore an ugly sullen face. The shadow of the gaping mouth of the coming Monday had begun to swallow it. Below, by this time, they had found out that the guarded boy was missing.

Now came the hour of tiffin. This was a red-letter portion of Brajeshwar's day. The marketing for it was his charge. In those days confectioners, at the price of their ghee, did not hold a profit, and the savour of a tiffin had not yet turned into poison.

If we got kachuri and singara, or even a potato curry, it took no time to put it into the mouth. But at the proper time, when Brajeshwar bent his crooked neck still more, and said, "Look, babu, what I have brought today!", there was commonly seen a paper cone of fried Chinese peanuts. It is not true that we had no taste for it, but its charm lay in its cheapness. I never uttered a sound of complaint. Even on the day when a cone of palm-leaf appeared with its tilgaja, not a word.

The day's light was growing dim. With a heavy mind I took one more turn about the roof, and looked down below. The water-fowl had flown from the pond. People had begun to come and go at the bathing-ghat, the shadow of the banyan lay over half the pond, and from the road the cry of the syces of the carriages could be heard.

9

The days go by monotonous. The middle of the day is swallowed up by school. The reading done in the morning and evening, scattered, is merely the surplus. When I entered the room, the benches and tables of the class struck on my mind like the dry knocking of an elbow. Day after day they wore the same ugly face.

At evening I returned home. In the schoolroom the lamp was held up, as the signal on the road of the next day's lessons. One day, a bear-dancer came into the courtyard of our house. Another day, a snake-charmer, to play with snakes. Another day a juggler, giving a taste of something new.

On our Chitpur Road today their little drums are never heard. They have left the country, saluting the cinema from afar. As a kind of grasshopper blends its colour with a dry leaf and cannot be told from it, so my life was blended with the dry days, and grew pale like them.

Then games were of a few kinds only. There were marbles, and what is called batball, a very distant relation of cricket. And there were the spinning of lathim-tops and the flying of kites. The games of boys in the city were all so feeble. Football

on the open field, with all its bounding and leaping, was still across the sea. And so, one after another, the days of one measure drove in around me a fence of dry stakes.

Then one day the shehnai sounded in the tune of Baroanwa. Into the house came a new bride, in a red sari, with bracelets of fine gold. In the twinkling of an eye the fence fell open, and a new person from the land of illusion appeared beyond the bounds of acquaintance. I wander about at a distance, not daring to approach her. She has taken her place on the seat of honour, and I am a boy of no account.

The house was then divided into two mahals. The men lived outside, and the women in the inner chambers. The nawabi custom still lingered. I remember Didi, walking on the roof with the new bride beside her, speaking heart to heart. When I tried to go near, there was a rebuke. The neighbourhood was, I found, beyond the line that marked the boys' domain. Again I had to turn back with a dry face to the dusty old days.

Suddenly the rain-water from the far-off hills sweeps away the foundation of the old dam. So it happened this time. My sister-in-law introduced a new law in the house. Her place became the room next to the roof within. That roof was now wholly hers. At the wedding of dolls, the leaf-plates for the feast were laid out there. On the day of the feast I became the chief person. My sister-in-law cooked well, and she loved to feed people, and to satisfy this passion she had me present. On my return from school her own prasad was ready. With the shrimp chachchari and the soaked rice, she would sometimes mix a little suggestion of chilli, and on those days there was nothing more to say. Sometimes when she went to a relative's house, I could not bear to see her slippers set outside the room, and in anger I would hide some valuable thing from her room to begin a quarrel. I said, "When you go, who will take care of your room? Am I a watchman?" She said angrily, "You needn't look after my room any more. Look after your own hands."

The women of this age will laugh and say, "Was there no brother-in-law in the world, except in one's own house?" I admit it. Nowadays things have all at once grown very big. Then, great and small alike, we were all children.

Now, on my solitary Bedouin roof, a new phase began, with the company of men and the affection of men. It was Jyotidada who brought that phase to life.

10

A new breeze blew in the kingdom of the roof, and a new season descended.

Father had left Jorasanko by then. Jyotidada came and sat in the outer room on the third floor. I took a small place, one corner of it.

The purdah of the women's apartments did not remain. Today this is not new to hear, but then it was so new that it could not be measured. Long before this, when I was a child, my Mejdada had returned to the country as a Civilian. At Bombay, on going to join his first duty, he astonished the outside world by taking my sister-in-law with him before their very eyes. To take the daughter-in-law of the house abroad to a distant land, without leaving her among the family, was in itself a great enough thing. On top of that there was no hiding on the journey, and this was a monstrous breach of custom. The sky fell upon the heads of the kinsfolk.

Dress for going out of doors had not yet become fashionable among women. The mode of wearing the sari with a jacket, which has now become so general, was first begun by my sister-in-law.

The little girls had not yet taken to frocks, nor had they swung their plaits. At any rate, in our house the dress among the little ones was the peshwaz. When the Bethune School was first opened, my eldest sister was of very tender age. She was one of the first group who made smooth the path of girls' education there. Her complexion was fair, and the like of it was not to be found in this country. I have heard that when she was going to school in her palanquin, wearing her peshwaz, she was taken for a stolen English girl, and the police once stopped her.

I have said already that in those days there was no stiffness in the intercourse of great and small. But in the midst of all these old customs Jyotidada came with an

unfettered new mind. I was twelve years his junior. That I should have caught his eye from such a distance of age was a marvel. A further marvel was that when I chatted with him he never shut my mouth with a reproof for impertinence. For this reason I never lacked courage to think any thought. Today I live among boys. When I begin to talk of five different things, I see their mouths tongue-tied. They are afraid to question. I understand that these are the sons of that old age when the elders spoke and the children were mute. The boys of the new age have courage to ask questions, and the boys of the elder age accept everything, with bowed neck.

To the roof-room came a piano. And there came the varnished furniture of that day, from Bow Bazaar. My heart swelled in my breast. To the eyes of a poor boy it seemed the cheap new-fangled splendour.

Now the fountain of my song burst forth. Jyotidada would pass his hands over the piano and create new tune after new tune, in ever new turns, and keep me beside him. Then and there it was my task to bind words to that rushing tune.

At the close of day, mats and pillows were spread on the roof. In a silver tray lay a garland of jasmine, soaked in a handkerchief, a glass of iced water in a saucer, and paan in its box.

My sister-in-law, after bathing, sat down with her hair put up. Jyotidada would come, a thin sheet wrapped about his body, and set his bow to the violin, while I caught up the songs in high-pitched notes. Whatever little voice the Creator had granted me, He had not yet taken back. In the sky, drowned in the sunset, my song went scattering from roof to roof. Hu-hu, the south wind rose from the far sea, and star after star bloomed in the sky.

My sister-in-law had turned the roof into a veritable garden. Above the tubs stood rows of tall palms, and about them jasmine, tuberose, night-scented rajanigandha, oleander, and dolon-champa. Of the harm that might come to the roof she never thought, for all of us were visionaries.

Akshay Chaudhuri often came. There was no tune in his voice, and he knew it, and others knew it better. But his obstinacy in singing would not yield. He had a

particular fondness for the Behag raga. He sang with his eyes shut, and did not see the faces of those who listened. If he found anything near his hand that would make a sound, he would bite his lip and, with sharp raps, make it serve as a substitute for the left-hand drum and the tabla. If there was a book with a bound cover, it served well. He was by nature a simple soul, and one could not tell his holiday from his working-day.

At evening the assembly would break up. I was always a boy who kept awake at night. When the others went to sleep, I wandered about. The whole neighbourhood was silent. On moonlit nights the shadows of the rows of trees upon the roof were like the alpana patterns of a dream. Beyond the roof, the top of the siris-tree swayed to the wind, and its leaves quivered. I do not know why, but what struck my eye most of all was the roof of a sleeping house across the lane, with a bent, slope-backed louvred attic. It stood there as though, standing, it had stretched out a finger towards something.

It is one o'clock at night, then two. On the great street before the house voices rise:

"Say Hari, Hari-bol."

11

In those days the fancy for keeping birds in cages was to be found in every house. What I liked least was the call of a cuckoo tied in its cage in some neighbour's house. Bouthakurun had procured a shama from China. From beneath its cloth cover its whistle would rise like a fountain. There were birds of many other kinds too, whose cages hung along the western verandah. Every morning a man with a bag of insects came to supply their food: grasshoppers from his bag, and parched-gram meal for the grain-eaters.

Jyotidada answered all my arguments. From women one cannot expect so much. Once Bouthakurun took it into her head to keep squirrels in a cage. I said the thing

was wrong. She said I need not play the schoolmaster. That can hardly be called an answer. So, instead of wrangling, I had to let the two little creatures go in secret. I heard more on the matter afterwards, but I made no reply.

I will now speak of a quarrel between us that was never ended.

Umesh was a shrewd man. From the English tailor's shops he would buy, at the price of scrap, all the cuttings of silk in every colour, and with these, together with remnants of net and light lace, he made the women's jackets. He would open a paper packet and spread the pieces carefully before their eyes, saying, "This is the fashion of the day." The women could not withstand the pull of that charm. I cannot say what grief it caused me. Again and again, in distress, I protested, and each time I was told that I must not give myself the airs of an elder. I told Bouthakurun that the old plain white sari with its black border, or the Dhakai, was far better and far more seemly. And when I look at the painted, doll-fashioned figures of the young wives of today, swathed in georgette, I wonder whether their husbands' younger brothers can find any word to say.

In Umesh's stitched coverings, Bouthakurun was lovely indeed. In those days there was not so much counterfeiting of the face.

I was always beaten by Bouthakurun in argument, for she gave no answer to an argument. I was beaten, too, at chess, a game in which her hand was well practised.

Since Jyotidada's name has come up, I shall have to say something more, to make him properly known. I must begin from a somewhat earlier time.

His zamindari business required him to go very often to Shilaidaha. Once, when he set out on that errand, he took me with him. For those days this was against all custom. It was what people could have called going too far. He must have thought of this going to and fro, from the house to the world outside, as a kind of travelling class. He had understood that mine was a mind that grazed in sky and wind, and that from there I should find my nourishment of my own accord. Some time later, when my life had risen into a still higher class, it was at this same Shilaidaha that I was being made a man.

The old indigo factory still stood. The Padma lay at a distance. The offices were on the ground floor, and our living quarters above. In front was a very large roof, and beyond it great casuarina trees, which had grown up in the days of the indigo-planter. Today the awe of the factory-sahib's rule lies utterly hushed. Where now is the Dewan, the messenger of death to the indigo-house? Where are the bands of bailiffs with staves on their shoulders and cloths bound about their loins? Where is the dining-room with its long table, to which the sahibs rode in from the district seat, turning night into day? The feast went on with the whirl of the dance in pairs, and the intoxication of champagne danced in the blood. The wretched tenants' cries of appeal never reached the ears of their superiors, and the road of their oppression ran long, as far as the district jail. All else of that time has become unreal. Only two things remain true, the graves of two Englishmen. The tall casuarinas sway in the wind, and

the grandchildren of those tenants sometimes, at midnight, see the sahib's ghost wandering in the ruined garden of the factory.

I lived with the mind of one who dwells alone. It was a small corner room, but the greater the sweep of the roof, the more far-spreading was my holiday. It was the holiday of an unknown, foreign land, and like the black water of an old pool, it had no bottom to be found. The bou-katha-kao called and called; I thought my drifting thoughts and thought them on. And all the while my notebook began to fill with verse. They were like the mango blossoms of the first flowering of Magh, on the point of falling, and already fallen.

In those days, if a young boy, and still more a girl, wrote two lines of verse by counting syllables, the connoisseurs of the country thought that there had never been the like and never would be.

I have seen the names of those girl poets, and their writings were published in the papers. But when the carefully preserved fourteen syllables, the fine words and the raw rhymes, had all faded away, then on that very ground, where the names had been wiped out, rows upon rows of the names of the girls of today have come into flower.

Boys have far less courage than girls, and far more shyness. I do not remember that any boy of tender years then wrote poetry, except myself. A nephew of mine, older than I, told me one day that if one poured words into a mould of fourteen syllables, they set into verse. I saw the working of this magic with my own eyes. And at once, in the very mould of fourteen syllables, a lotus bloomed, and on it, besides, a bee found room to alight. The difference between myself and the poets was wiped out, and I have been wiping it out ever since.

I remember that when I was in the class below the scholarship form, the Superintendent, Govinda Babu, heard a rumour that I wrote verses. He commissioned me to write, thinking the name of the Normal School would shine. I had to write, and I had to read it aloud to the boys of the class, and to hear that it was certainly stolen. The scoffers did not know that when I grew shrewd I should make my hand skilful at the stealing of ideas. But these stolen goods are precious.

I remember once composing a poem in poyar and tripadi together, in which I lamented that when one swims to pluck a lotus, the ripples of one's own hands drive it further and further off, and it cannot be caught. Akshay Babu took this poem about to the houses of his kinsfolk, reciting it. The kinsfolk said that the boy had a hand for writing.

Bouthakurun's conduct was the opposite. That I should ever become a writer, she would not for a moment allow. She kept taunting me, saying that I should never write like Bihari Chakravarti. I would grow dejected and think that if I could have won a mark from a far lower rung of the ladder than his, she would have hesitated to wave away so airily the opinion of her little poet brother-in-law on women's dress.

Jyotidada loved to ride. He even took Bouthakurun riding, by way of Chitpur Road to the Eden Gardens, a thing that in those days did indeed happen. At Shilaidaha he gave me a pony. That creature was no mean runner. He would send me out to the field by the Rath-tala to give it its gallop. Over that rough and rutted field I would come galloping back, ready at every moment to fall. I did not fall, because he had in his mind such confidence that I should not. Some time later he put me on horseback even in the streets of Calcutta. That was no pony but a horse of real spirit. One day it carried me on its back straight through the gateway and into the courtyard, where it was fed its grain. From the next day my acquaintance with it came to an end.

I have said already that Jyotidada had taken great pains with gun-shooting. He had a longing for tiger-hunting. One day Bishwanath the hunter brought word that a tiger had come into the jungle at Shilaidaha. At once he got his gun in readiness. The astonishing thing is that he took me too. It seemed that the thought of anything going wrong had not crossed his mind.

Bishwanath was indeed a master huntsman. He knew that shooting from a machan was no work for a man. He would call out to the tiger face to face and then fire. His aim had never once failed him.

The jungle was thick. In the shade and light of such a jungle, a tiger is hard to see. Splinters of bamboo had been cut to make a kind of ladder up the trunk of a stout bamboo tree. Jyotidada climbed it, gun in hand. I had not even shoes on my feet, and, if the tiger charged, I had no means of giving it a thrashing with my slipper. Bishwanath made a sign. For a long time Jyotidada could see nothing. At last, after much peering, a stripe on the tiger's body in the thicket caught his spectacled eyes. He fired. By chance the shot struck its spine. It could not rise again. It seized in its jaws whatever sticks it could reach, lashed its tail, and roared terribly. Thinking it over, I have my doubts. I know it is not in the nature of tigers to wait so long, patiently, in order to die. Had no one the night before, by some device, mixed opium with its food? Why else such drowsiness?

Another time a tiger came to the jungle of Shilaidaha. We two brothers set out in search of it, riding on an elephant. Tearing up sugar-cane from the fields, chewing

it as it went, the elephant moved with ponderous gait, and every step sent an earthquake through our backs. The forest came before us. Pressing with its knees and pulling with its trunk, the elephant began to bring the trees down to the ground. I had heard earlier, from Bishwanath's brother Chamaru, that the worst of all disasters is when a tiger springs and clamps itself upon the back of an elephant. Then the elephant rushes through the jungle with a bellowing cry, and those on its back, struck by the boughs, cannot be reckoned limb from limb. That day, as I sat on the elephant, the picture of broken bones was in my mind to the very end. Out of shame I kept down my fear. With a show of recklessness I kept looking this way and that, as if I only wished to set eyes on the tiger once. The elephant pushed into the thick of the jungle. In one place it stopped short. The mahout made no effort to urge it on. Of the two hunters, the tiger and the man, the elephant had the greater faith in the tiger. Jyotidada would wound the tiger and make it desperate. This, no doubt, was the elephant's chief anxiety. Suddenly the tiger leapt out of the thicket. It was like a squall bursting from a cloud with thunder in it. To our eyes, accustomed to cats, dogs and jackals, here was a great mass of strength in neck and shoulder, yet seemingly without weight. Over the open fields, in the noonday sun, it raced away. How beautiful, how effortless the speed of its running! There was no crop in the field. A place for seeing a running tiger in its fullness could not have been better: that vast field, yellow, steeped in sunlight.

One thing remains to be told, which may amuse. At Shilaidaha the gardener used to pick flowers and arrange them in vases. It came into my head to write poems with the coloured juice of flowers. The little juice one gets by pressing would not rise to the mouth of the pen. I thought that a machine must be made. A wooden bowl with a hole, and a pestle from a mortar to be turned round and round on it, would do. It could be turned by a wheel bound with a cord. I made my petition to Jyotidada. Perhaps he smiled inwardly, but it did not show outside. He gave the order, and the carpenter came with his timber. The machine was made. But however I turned the cord-bound pestle in the bowl filled with flowers, the flowers were crushed to mud and no juice came. Jyotidada saw that the juice of flowers and the pressure of a machine would not agree in measure. Yet he did not laugh in my face.

That was the one time in my life that I set out to be an engineer. It is written in the scriptures that when a man thinks himself what he is not, a god stands ready to bow his head. That god cast a sidelong glance at my engineering, and from that day I have laid no hand upon an instrument, and have never even strung the wires of a sitar or an esraj.

I have written in Jivansmriti how, in competing with the Flotilla Company by running swadeshi steamers on the rivers of Bengal, Jyotidada ruined himself. Bouthakurun had died before that. Jyotidada broke up his third-floor household and went away. In the end he built a house on a hill at Ranchi.

12

Now another act of the third-floor room began, with my own household [sic; the passage trails off in the source]….

For a time the Golabari, the palanquin, and the empty room on the third-storey roof were like a gypsy's camp to me, now here, now there. Then Bouthakurun came, and a garden appeared in the roof-room. A piano came into the upper chamber, and fountains of new music sprang up.

In the shade of the attic on the eastern side, Jyotidada's coffee was prepared in the morning. At that hour he would read aloud the first draft of some new play of his. Sometimes I too was called, to patch in a line or two from my very unripe hand. By degrees the sun came on. The crows, sitting on the roof above, would caw, with their eyes fixed upon the bits of bread. When ten o'clock struck, the shade was gone and the roof grew hot.

At noon Jyotidada went down to the office on the ground floor. Bouthakurun would peel the fruit, cut it with care, and arrange it on a silver dish. With it would be a few sweetmeats of her own making, and over them were strewn rose petals. In the glass was green-coconut water, or fruit juice, or the soft kernel of the palm-fruit

cooled with ice. Over all she laid a flower-embroidered silk handkerchief, and at one or two in the afternoon, at tiffin time, she sent it off in a Moradabad brass tray to the office.

At that time the fever of Bangadarshan was upon us. Suryamukhi and Kundanandini went in and out of every house like our own kin. What has happened, what will happen? That was the thought of the whole country. When the number came, no one in the neighbourhood slept in the noon hour. It was well for me that I had no need to scramble for it. For I had one gift, that I could read aloud well. Bouthakurun liked listening to my reading better than reading to herself. There were no electric fans then, and as I read I would draw to myself a share of the breeze from Bouthakurun's hand-fan.

13

Now and then Jyotidada went for a change of air to a garden on the bank of the Ganges. The riverside had not yet lost caste through the touch of English commerce. The birds' nests along both its banks had not been crushed, and the iron trunks of the machines had not yet puffed black breath into the light of the sky.

The first house by the Ganges that I remember was a small two-storeyed one. The new rains had come. The shadows of the clouds floated over the current, playing among the waves, and gathered dark above the trees of the wood across the water. On many such days I have made songs of my own, but on that day I did not. A verse of Vidyapati rose in my mind: "This brimming month of Bhadra, rain-laden, my house is empty." I cast it in my own tune, stamped on it the seal of a raga, and made it my own. By the Ganges, that rainy day, enamelled by that melody, remains to this day in the treasure-chest of my songs of the rains. I remember how gusts of wind kept striking the tops of the trees, how the branches and boughs were locked in struggle, how the small boats, raising their white sails, leaned into the wind and ran, and how the waves leapt and fell with a splash upon the landing-steps. Bouthakurun came back; I sang the song to her. She did not say she liked it; she

listened in silence. I must have been sixteen or seventeen. Arguments about trifles still went on, but the edge had gone out of them.

Some days later we changed our dwelling to Moran Sahib's garden. One might fairly call it a palace. It had rooms of uneven height with windows of coloured glass, floors paved with marble, and a stair rising in flights directly from the Ganges to a long verandah. There the spell of night-waking came upon my mind. The pacing there was in time with the pacing I did on the bank of the Sabarmati. That garden is no more. The Dandi works, grinding its iron teeth, has swallowed it.

Speaking of Moran's garden, I remember a cooking-party now and then under the bakul tree. There was not much spice in that cooking; the virtue was in the hand. I remember that at the time of my sacred-thread ceremony Bouthakurun cooked the ascetic's rice for us two brothers, with pure clarified ghee in it. For those three days its taste and its fragrance kept the greedy spellbound.

I had one great difficulty: my body did not easily fall sick. The other boys of the house, who knew how to fall ill, received her tending with her own hands. And not only did they have her tending, they sat taking up her time. My share grew less.

The third-storey days of that time melted away with her. Then came my dwelling in the upper storey, which cannot be fitted exactly to what went before.

Wandering on, I have come to the main door of youth. Now I have to turn back again to the borders of childhood.

Now I must give an account of the age of sixteen. At its very beginning Bharati appeared. Nowadays on every side in the country the eagerness to bring out a journal is bubbling up. I understand the strength of that intoxication when I look back at the folly of those days. A boy like me, who had neither learning nor power, took up room in that assembly too, and nobody took any notice of it. From this it can be seen that a kind of giddiness of youthful folly was blowing everywhere. The only well-ripened journal in the country then was Bangadarshan. Ours was half-ripe. What my eldest brother wrote was as hard to read as to understand, and in

the midst of it I wrote a story. What a plait of babble it was I was not of an age to judge, nor had the eyes of others yet opened enough to see.

Here it is time to say a word about my eldest brother. Jyotidada's gatherings were in the third-floor room, and my eldest brother's were on our southern verandah. At one time he had sunk, in his own mind, into weighty questions of philosophy, which were beyond our reach. There were few to hear what he wrote and thought. If anyone consented and was caught, he would not let him go, or the man would not leave him, and what such a man claimed of him was not merely to hear philosophy. A single companion had joined my eldest brother, whose name I do not know, and whom everyone called the Philosopher. The other brothers laughed about him, not merely for his greed for mutton chops, but for his various urgent needs, day after day. Besides philosophy, my eldest brother's hobby was the making of mathematical problems. Pages of figures and signs blew about the verandah in the south wind. He could not sing, and played an English flute, but not for the sake of songs: it was to measure by arithmetic the tune of the songs in each raga. Then at one time he began to write Swapnaprayan. At its outset he set about making metres. He used to weigh the sounds of the Sanskrit language in the scales of Bengali sounds and arrange them. Many of these he preserved, many he did not, and they were scattered on torn leaves. Afterwards he began to write poetry. What he wrote down he threw away many times over. What he wrote did not easily please him. We had not the wit to gather up those discarded lines of his. He read aloud as he wrote, and listeners gathered about him. The whole household had gone wild with delight in the savour of this poem. In the midst of the reading, peals of laughter would burst out. His laughter filled the sky, and if anyone was within reach at the height of that laughter, he would clap him on the back till the man could not sit still.

This southern verandah was a spring at the heart of the Jorasanko house; its current has dried up, and my eldest brother has gone away to the ashram at Santiniketan. I only remember, now and then, that in the garden before that verandah the autumn sunshine, with its homesick ache, lay spread, and I was making and singing a new song: "Today in the autumn sun, in the morning dream, what does my heart, I know not, so long for?" And there comes to my mind a song of a hot, blazing noon: "Idle sport, the livelong day, what game is this, with myself alone?"

Another habit of my eldest brother's was remarkable, and that was his swimming. If nothing else, he would go fifty times across the pond and back. When he was at the garden at Panihati, he used to cross the Ganges and go far beyond. Following his example, we too learnt swimming from boyhood. I began to learn by myself. I would wet my pyjamas, and pulling and tugging, fill them with air. As soon as I entered the water they swelled up round my waist like a girdle of air. After that there was no chance of sinking. When I was grown up and lived on the sandbank at Shilaidaha, I once swam across the Padma. The story is not so astounding as it sounds. There was no current in that Padma, broken here and there by shoals, to be respected; still, it makes a story to frighten landsmen with, and I have told it many times. When I went in boyhood to the hills of Dalhousie, Father never forbade me to wander about alone. On the footpaths I would climb from one hill to another with an iron-tipped staff in my hand. The best fun was in building up fears in my mind. One day, walking down a steep path, my foot fell on a heap of dry leaves under a tree. My foot slipped a little, and I checked myself with the staff. But I could have not checked myself. How long would it have taken to roll down the slope and drop far below into the torrent? What might have happened I told Mother at great length. Besides, wandering in the thick pine-wood, I might suddenly have met a bear; that too was worth telling. Nothing that could have happened did happen, and so I had stored up all my mishaps in my mind.

My story of swimming across the Padma is not very different from these.

When I turned seventeen, I had to withdraw from the editorial gathering of Bharati.

It was at this time that my going to England was settled. And it was advised that, before taking ship, I should go to my Mejdada and lay the foundation of English manners. He was then serving as a judge at Ahmedabad; Mejobouthakurun and her children were in England, and Mejdada was waiting to take furlough and join them.

I was pulled up, roots and all, and brought from one field to another. A reckoning with the new climate began. At the outset, shyness gave me pause in everything. How was I to keep my dignity in conversation with strangers? That was the worry.

The world I did not know was one in which even familiarity was not easy, and there was no way to avoid it, and a boy's mind like mine only stumbled there constantly.

At Ahmedabad my mind began to wander within a picture of old history. The judge's residence was at Shahibag, in a palace of the Emperors' time. By day Mejdada went off to his work; the great empty rooms yawned, and I wandered about all day as though possessed by ghosts. In front was a vast terrace, from which one saw the Sabarmati winding in loops through the sand, trailing its knee-deep water. In the stone masonry of the cistern, here and there on the terrace, there seemed to be stored the very news of the splendour of the Begums' bathing.

In Calcutta, where we were brought up, I had never seen history lift its head anywhere. Our gaze was fixed on the short time that lay very near. It was at Ahmedabad that I first saw that the history in motion had stopped, and that its great family-house had turned its back. Its former days lay buried under the earth like the treasure of a Yaksha. It was there that the first hint of the story "The Hungry Stones" came into my mind.

That was a matter of how many hundreds of years ago! In the nahabat-khana the roshan-chauki was playing, in the ragas of the eight watches of day and night; on the road the hoofs of horses were sounding in time; the troops of Turkish cavalry were at drill, and in the sun the points of their lances flashed. Round the Emperor's court there ran the fatal whisperings and rustling. In the inner apartments Abyssinian eunuchs stood on guard with naked swords in their hands. In the Begums' baths the fountains of rosewater leapt, and the jingle of armlets and bracelets rose. Today Shahibag stands still, like a forgotten tale; around it nowhere are those colours, nowhere those sounds, only dry days and nights whose savour is spent.

Old history had its bones laid bare; it has the skull, but no crown. To say that I managed to clothe it with flesh and mask and set up a complete figure in the museum of my mind would be saying too much. I had set up a rough sketch before my mind, like the frame of a chalchitra, and it was only the plaything of my fancy. Something remains in the memory; much I forget, and so such patchwork comes easy. Now that I have come to my eightieth year, the one portrait of myself that

stands before me does not agree line by line with the original. Much of it is of my own making.

After I had stayed here for some time, my Mejdada thought that if he could bring me into company with the kind of women who can give a foreign land the savour of home, my homeless mind might find some ease. That would also be an easy way of learning English. So for a few days I took lodging in a certain household in Bombay. In that house there was a young woman of the learned fashion of the present day, who had brought home her education, polished to a brilliant finish, from England. My learning was slight, and if she had slighted me, she could not have been blamed. She did not. I had no capital of book-learning to display, and so, whenever I had the opportunity, I let it be known that I had a hand for writing verse. That was my greatest capital for winning affection. She to whom I made known this poetic gift did not weigh and measure it, but accepted it. She asked the poet for a pet-name; I supplied one, and it pleased her ear. I had wished to entwine that name in the metre of my poem. I bound it into the weaving of a poem; she heard it in the morning raga Bhairavi, and said, "Poet, if I heard your song, I think I could rise to life again even from my deathbed." From this it will be seen that when women wish to show affection, they enlarge a little upon what they say, mingling it with a drop of honey, for the sake of spreading delight.

I remember that it was from her lips that I first heard praise of my looks. In that applause there was often some artfulness. Once, for example, she said to me particularly, "One request of mine you must keep: never grow a beard. The boundary of your face must in no way be covered." That promise has not been kept to this day, as everyone knows. She died before disobedience could show itself on my face.

In some years, on that banyan tree of ours, foreign birds suddenly come and build nests. Before I have learned to know the dance of their wings, I find they are gone. They come with unknown tunes from far-off forests. So in the course of life there come, now and then, from the unknown courts of the world, messengers of one's own kin, who leave the borders of the heart's dominion wider than before. They come unbidden, and in the end, one day, when called, are not to be found. As they

go they set an embroidered border on the cloth of one's living, and raise for ever the worth of one's days and nights.

14

The first work of the hand of that Modeller who has made me was fashioned of the clay of Bengal. The first outline of a form appeared; that I call boyhood, and there is little alloy in it. Its materials were stored within myself, and some part lay in the air of the house and the hands of the household. Often the work of shaping stops there. After this, those who undergo a special moulding and hammering in the workshop of schooling and learning command a special brand-price in the market.

By good fortune I escaped nearly the whole of that workshop. The masters and pandits specially engaged for me gave up the helm in the task of ferrying me across. Gyanchandra Bhattacharya, the son of Anandachandra Vedantabagish and himself a B.A., had understood that this boy could not be driven along the beaten road of schooling. The difficulty was that boys had to be cast in the mould of the educated gentleman; and the elders of those days had not thought of this with any force. In that age there was no pressure to haul rich and poor alike into the same net of college learning. In our family there was then no wealth, but there was a name, and so the custom endured. The anxiety about education was slack. From the class below the scholarship form we were at one time sent off to De Cruz's Bengal Academy. If nothing else, it was hoped by our guardians, we should become fluent in the English phrases needed to keep up respectability. In the Latin class I was dumb and deaf; the exercise-books of every size were blank from end to end, like a widow's plain cloth. Seeing my strange obstinacy in not studying, the master of the class complained to Mr. De Cruz. De Cruz explained that we were not born to study; we had come into the world to pay our fees month by month. Gyan Babu had decided to some extent in the same way. But he had cut one path through it all. He made me learn Kumarasambhava by heart from beginning to end. Shutting me in a room, he had me translate Macbeth. On the other side, Pandit Ramsarbaswa taught me Shakuntala. Outside the lessons of the class he let me go free, and he had some fruit of it. This was the material for shaping my boyhood

mind, together with any Bengali books that came my way, with no sorting or choosing.

I came to England, and a foreign craftsmanship began upon the shaping of my life. In chemistry it is called the creation of a compound substance. The play of fortune in it is this: I went to learn some learning in proper form, and some attempts were made, but nothing came of them. Mejobouthan was there, and her children, and I remained entangled in the net of my own household. I wandered about the edges of the school world; masters taught me at home, and I gave them the slip. Whatever I did gain was the reward of living near human beings. From many sides the work of English air went on upon my mind.

Mr. Palit freed me from the bonds of home. I took lodging in the house of a doctor. They made me forget that I was in a foreign land. The affection Mrs. Scott showed me was entirely genuine. She always felt for me like a mother. I had by then entered London University, where Henry Morley taught English literature. His was no dry goods shipped from a textbook. Literature came alive in his mind and in the tone of his voice, and reached that inmost place of ours where the soul seeks its own food, with no loss of savour on the way. Coming home, I would turn over the matter of my reading in the books of the Clarendon Press, and understand it. That is, I took upon myself the work of being my own master. Needlessly, from time to time, Mrs. Scott thought that my face was growing thin, and would grow anxious. She did not know that from boyhood the gate of sickness had been closed upon my body. Every day at dawn I had bathed in water from which the ice was just melted. By the medical doctrine of that time, to survive such irregularity was to cross the boundary of the scriptures.

I was able to study at the University for only three months. But nearly all of my foreign education came from the touch of human beings. Our Craftsman, whenever he finds an opportunity, mingles new materials into his work. In those three months, living near the heart of the English, that alloy was made. A charge fell upon me to read aloud every evening, by turns, poetic drama or history, until eleven o'clock. In that short time a great deal was read. That reading was not the reading of the class. It was the meeting of man's mind with literature. I went to England, and I did not become a barrister. I did not receive a shock strong enough to shake

the foundation frame of my life, but I took into myself a clasping of hands between East and West, and found the meaning of my own name within my being.

BALAK (THE BOY)

Santiniketan, Asharh 1344 (June–July 1937)

My years were then unripe, my body light,
A bird's, save that it had no wings for flight.
Flocks of pigeons rose from the neighbouring roof,
And crows came calling on the verandah rail.

The pedlar went crying from the lane's far side,
His basket of tapsi fish with a gamchha covered.
My elder brother, violin tilted on his shoulder,
Stood on the roof, and his tuning seemed to take its note
From the evening star.

I would be at Boudidi's side, leaving my English lessons,
Her red-bordered sari framing her face.
I stole her bunch of keys and hid it in a flower-tub,
And teased her into loving anger with a hundred pranks.

Kishori Chatterji would turn up, suddenly, at dusk,
A cheap hookah in his left hand, a shawl across his shoulder.
At quickened measure he reeled off the rhymes of Lava and Kusha;
My notebook lay written on, my lessons lay unread.

In my heart I wished that some pretext might make it easy
To join this company of panchali singers.
No worry of rising a class lay on my head;
I would go singing from village to new village.

When school was out, and I came near the house,
I suddenly saw: a cloud had come down, pressing close to the roof.
The sky broke open, rain fell, and the road floated in water;
The trunks of Airavata appeared in every water-pouring pipe.

In the dark one heard the rim-jhim of the streams.
Where, across the pathless moor, was the prince, lost?

The mountains I know from the map, the rivers I know:
Kunlun and Mississippi and Yangtze-kiang,
Knowledge mingled with half-knowing, heard from afar,
A net woven of many threads of many colours,

Sounds of every kind, and comings and goings of every sort,
Out of all of them a light world, in which my mind was girt.
My thoughts went wandering through it, now and again,
Like moss in flood-water, like birds beneath the clouds.