# *CHITRAKAR*

I see my childhood in the grey light of my memory.

It is afternoon. I am lying on a huge bed like the ones they used those days. My mother is sitting by my side. She asks me, 'Will you eat some rice?' and I say, 'Yes.' The kitchen is next door; the smell of *ghutey* smoke hits my nostrils. Soon my mother brings a small plate and an earthen pot and lifts and seats me before the plate. She serves rice out of the pot onto the plate and says, 'Wait, I am coming.' By the time she does, with some stew made of *magur* fish, I have nearly finished the rice.

'Good heavens! You have eaten up all the rice! What will you eat the fish stew with?' she exclaims. Anyway, she kneaded the little rice left with trie stew and a few left-over pieces of bananas and fed it to me. Then she wiped my mouth and put me back in bed, content. Outside, I could hear her say, 'I have fulfilled his wish to eat rice before he went,' and another voice responding, 'When the doctor has written off his case that was the right thing to do.'

I feel that I *knew* my mother the first time that day. I do not quite recollect what our relationship was earlier to this.

That evening my father came straight to my room when he came home. He sat on my bed, felt my pulse, tapped my stomach and said, 'He looks good now.' And added while getting up and leaving the room, 'Why did the doctor make such an ominous remark this morning?'

*A* few days later there was a big commotion in the house; my father was shouting, 'You fed rice to a child face to face with death! What kind of brains do you all have?' He went on raving outside the room, while my mother came and sat silently by my bedside without saying a word. In fact I came to learn, a little later, that I was stricken with a serious illness and had been given up for lost. And with the passage of time my father too came to accept that my gradual recovery followed that little meal of rice.

Our small house in Calcutta; its wet courtyard and water-tank; the yard washed clean in the morning. The basket of vegetables, the bag offish. Vegetables being cut on the *boti* in front of the pantry. I move in the midst of these. Kusum, the maid, goes on repeating, 'Just out of your sick-bed! Go inside! Don't walk barefoot on the wet ground.' The pantry has numerous utensils, pots and pans. I hesitate to go there for fear of cockroaches. I dread going near the water-tank for fear of earthworms and centipedes. On the terrace is my elder brother's study. A doctor, his room is strewn with human bones. It has a picture of Keshubchandra Sen on the wall and a large mirror on the window sill. I am not afraid to go there. All the same, when the lights come on in the street in the evening and the reflection of the coconut fronds quivers on the mirror, I cannot bear to stand there.

Thus, for me, a thick pall of fear lay on the house and its surroundings. The fear of earthworms, centipedes and cockroaches on the ground floor and the fear of the shadows of coconut trees on the top floor. Much of my childhood was cramped by this girdle of fear.

An enormous comet[1] has come up in the sky and to see it, people have gathered on the top of each roof, girls and boys, young and old. While watching it I came to feel for the first time how overpowering a mixture of fear and wonder can be. My father, my elder brother, all, ask me, 'What are you afraid of?' I cannot say what; nor can I turn my eyes away from the comet. I can recall many other facts from my childhood; but I cannot quite figure out today which of these are my own experiences and which I have borrowed from others.

However, I distinctly remember one special day. I got engrossed one afternoon, copying from an English notebook of my brother's, in

the room upstairs. The most attractive feature was how the letters went up and down; the letters T, G, J, L went hurtling up and down and below these I added loops like the wheels of a steam-engine and random dots here and there, above. I brought this piece of writing downstairs and showed it to my mother. She was delighted. When my brothers came home from school and college, she showed it to them excitedly saying, 'Look! He has written English just like all of you'. They were not pleased. They said in annoyance, 'The dunderhead! That is why he has written it this way!' What the elders say is not said in vain; it came to be so. I spent seventy-three years of my life shepherding crooked lines and dots.

From the dim-lit regions of my childhood I can recall a few more details. We were rather intimate with the people who lived on the other side of our house, enough to feel like one family. It was in their house that I first saw a harmonium and heard Haren-babu play the clarinet. Often in the evenings, I sat on the cot in their sitting room staring hard at the clarinet case when it was being opened. The body of the clarinet was made of units of black-coloured wood and held around it were all kinds of trappings in sparkling silver. Then Haren-babu would begin to play.

There was a large open ground outside that house where young people of the neighbourhood exercised with clubs, or did push-ups. I never ventured there. Nor did I ever see Haren-babu go that way. Beneath Haren-babu's cot stood a pair of polished pumps with broad laces tied to look like a butterfly with open wings. Black shoes, black instrument, Haren-babu with his shiny black skin, only the inside of the clarinet case was lined with bright red cloth. There was no other colour in the room. My eyes went round and round the shoes which I longed to lift and see closely. But I never had the courage.

Then, we changed house and came to a new neighbourhood. As far as I can recall I had never seen the members of our family as distinct individuals till we moved to this new house. Till then they were just so many busy men and women. Nor did I have any recollection earlier of what things we had in the house. In this house I became aware of the separate identity of each person. My brother going out to

fish with rod and wheel and other paraphernalia on Sunday mornings, spreading around him the smell of fried *methi* leaves. I knew his bag contained earthworms, beetle's eggs, rice, fried *methi* leaves, hooks and flies. On Sundays, my father sat sewing frills of red-coloured cloth to palm-leaf fans; on other days he went to office. I also remember clothes-rods on the walls of the rooms and the verandah hung with clothes of various colours. Then, the glazed pictures on walls, the chest of drawers, the table and rolls of mats standing at the corners.

From the morning the pedlars started calling. From the far end of the lane came the utensil seller, -clanging a bell-metal plate. By the time this sound subsided the call of bangle-seller took over. Girls wore bangles from the bangle-seller, bangles of plain glass, bevelled glass and such an astounding variety of colours! I stared open-eyed at the colours and watched bangles go up diverse wrists. My time passed this way till midday. Then at the stroke of three the barber's wife came to paint the feet of the ladies with *alta.* At the same time, the hawker of sweets cried, *'Lady Kenny,* made *ofkheer,'* from the turn of the lane. At four o'clock my father and brothers returned from office, college or school. The washer woman turned up at the same time; she took our clothes in the morning and after washing them with soap, returned them unpressed in the afternoon. In the evening the *ghugni* man came on his rounds and on summer days, the call of the *kulfiwala* followed. Now and then one also saw a group of boys playing *danda gulli.* I went on staring at them but they never asked me to join. So passed my time just looking at things.

I got into this habit of watching things with wide-eyed interest right from my childhood; how the shoemaker made shoes, hammered them into shape on his three-armed anvil or secured the soles with nails; how each pedlar looked, whether his clothes were long or short; whether the office-going babus wore white shirts or striped. I went home and reported these—'I saw a man wearing a striped shirt!'—as if it was a startling discovery on my part. People at home often instructed me to 'Go and see who is at the door!' I would come back and say, 'A man with a green-bordered dhoti, coat, shawl on shoulders, stick in hand' and my elders would ask exasperatedly, 'Did you ask his name?' And I would reply, 'No!'

Thus 1 had on the one hand my elders and on the other, an assortment of people in varied dress and gear. Each lived in his own way. Our maid, Kusum, sat on the verandah and made paper bags. 1 too sat with her and made bags; I could fold pieces of paper, gum and stick them neatly. Kusum paid me compliments, 'You have a clean hand, your bags are beautiful.'

In time I lost interest in watching girls wear their bangles and making paper bags became my main occupation. Kusum announced, '1 will go on a pilgrimage with the money I earn by selling these bags and 1 shall take you with me'. That brought me new excitement. When our shopping came 1 ran up to see whether it had come in a bag 1 had made—with almost the same kind of enthusiasm with which I went to see my paintings when they were first hung in an exhibition.

In the evenings 1 went to the terrace upstairs and watched its worn out plaster, its cracks and holes and rubble. To tell the truth the years of my infancy and childhood passed without any companions of my own age. 1 had no playmates, nor did I learn to play.

I kept mostly indoors; and started learning English and Bengali. 1 tried to read all the books I could lay hands on. But at home everyone told me I should not read so much. Why my elders asked me not to read, at an age when they pressed others to do so, became clear to me in a few days. My father took me one morning to the Medical College to have my eyes tested. Dr Maynard, a famous eye specialist of those days, examined me in a dark room. Then, coming out, he put a piece of paper in my father's hands. Returning home my father explained his advice: 'If he goes for studies your son will lose even what little eyesight he has; improvement in his general health can help. But no eye specialist can.'

Now the search for glasses began. In those days Walter Bushnells were well-known opticians on Chowringhee. My father took me there for my glasses. When I stepped out on Chowringhee with those thick glasses in silver frames pushed up high on my nose, my father pointed to the signboards and asked me to count the people on the other side of the road, and then remarked, 'It looks like you can see quite well with those glasses.' 'Yes, quite well,' I agreed.

Now that I had been shown to a doctor and the glasses had been bought, efforts were made to improve my health. My father got a famous *kaviraj* to prescribe a diet. Snail soup, liver, tiny fish were part of my daily fare and massaging myself with oil, a daily duty. And whenever possible, an outing to the Maidan[2] with my elder brother to see the red sunrise.

This was followed by attempts to get me into a school. And I did too. But it was for such a short time that I carry no clear memory of my school days in Calcutta. But I cannot fail to mention Chuni-babu, the drawing teacher at Sanskrit College, and the drawing teacher of the Morton School—these two were my first gurus in art.

I came face to face with Chuni-babu on my first day in the school section of Sanskrit College; he sat there wrapped in a purple shawl, silent and fair of face. The muscles on the sides of his forehead were always tense and swollen, as though he were chewing words between his teeth. His students used foot-rules to draw lines and compasses to draw circles. If any student tried to draw a flower inside the circle he got upset and made a few loud raps on the table, declaring stiffly, 'Do what I ask you. Learn first the use of the foot-rule and compasses!'

The drawing teacher at the Morton School, where I went after I left Sanskrit College, was a well-meaning person. Sitting on his chair, he would first say, 'Let me see your pencils; first, learn how to sharpen a pencil.' Then he would take out a knife from his pocket and teach us how to sharpen our pencils as neatly as those 'Venus' pencils one saw in advertisements. By the time this lesson in sharpening came to an end, the period too would be over.

Everyone is stalked by certain shadows; shadows of death, illness, grief, insult or injury dog our steps like boon companions all the time. As for me, I had, from the time I was born, a shadow of uncertainty staring me in the face. This clouded the minds of the whole family for a long time; they all worried: What will happen to this boy? Only my mother always declared, 'Don't you bother, he will earn his bread and butter.' But what can the future of a boy be—a boy whom the doctor says will go blind and who does not find a seat in a school despite

wearing thick glasses? That 'he will earn his bread' was my mother's fond wish. But did that stand to reason? As time passed I too started to ponder: What will happen to me? I wanted to study but I could not find a seat that I could keep in any school. In no school did I sit for the annual examination which proved I did not remain in one long enough. While I was in this state of mind a sudden beam of light shone on my uncertain future. And this came about through my brother Bijanbihari's help.

I presume that the statue of Keshtodas Pal, surrounded by a railing, is still there at the junction of Harriscm Road and College Street. It was there that I first saw an art exhibition in the company of my brother Bijanbihari. On this railing, a gentleman had hung his oil paintings, all small-sized landscapes, priced from five to twenty rupees. My brother went around, saw each painting with keen interest and put to him various questions. As far as I remember all his questions were about how to paint. Once in a while a painting got sold. Then one day, both the artist and his paintings disappeared and sauce[3] paintings replaced them on the railing. These too were landscapes. After a few days coloured calendar prints replaced sauce paintings—Radha-Krishna in gilded costume, peacocks, etc. With the coming of the calendars my brother's interest in these exhibitions ceased. Those days vendors sat on the pavements with pictures printed in the presses of U. Ray, K. V. Sen and others, priced one or two pice each. Here, my brother sat on his haunches and took his pick of Oriental art, the works of Abanindranath, Suren Ganguly, Priyanath Sinha, Nandalal and the rest. He also bought prints of western painting and portraits of national celebrities. Coming home, he copied from these. His main interest was in Oriental art. When his classmates used to accompany him, they would get restless and say, 'Get up, Bijan', but he'd reply, 'You go along, I want to spend a little more time here.'

My brother was then a student in the school section of Sanskrit College. After he finished with his sports and games and discharged his chores at the charity club, he amused himself in his spare time at this College Street corner. Although I dropped out of the Sanskrit

School in the tenth class, no one stopped me from going there in the evenings with my brother. Another spot that attracted him besides this was the Old Market on Bow Bazar Street—later known as Chora Bazar. The Old Market seemed to us like a big museum. It had plenty of paintings and books on paintings. One came upon the picture shop^as soon as one entered the bazar, its walls almost entirely covered with framed oil paintings. The bazar had all kinds of wares—coats, trousers, leather leggings, crockery and cutlery. Displayed with these were fat gilt-bound books. One could also shop here for stencilled mottos of various kinds: *Lead me in thy Truth and teach me his Will* or things of that sort.

We spent our evenings in this way at the bend of College Street or, at other times, in the Old Market. One day while returning home a signboard—'Art Studio upstairs'—caught my brother's attention. When we climbed up we saw a small room with a mat-covered floor. The artist was squatting on the floor. My brother was greatly impressed by the mat-covered room and exclaimed, 'How beautiful it is!' Inside, on the walls, there were some nudes drawn in black ink. An oil painting of a fully nude woman could be seen behind the artist. The artist explained to my brother that these had to be looked at from the artistic point of view, that if so done, nothing was indecent; nudity was the highest beauty. My brother was hardly interested in this; what he wanted to know was how the pictures had been drawn in Indian ink. It was from this artist that we first heard the name of Bhavanicharan Laha. He said, 'Bhavani Laha is a big man, he can hire models by the month and, so, is able to paint so well. We can't afford to keep models that way, that is our problem.' When we went to the artist's studio again, a month later, he was not to be found. The place had been taken up by a tailor's shop.

Really speaking, my brother had a genuine urge to be an artist. Once he even met Mr Percy Brown, the Principal of the Art School. He could have gained admission into the school but in those days most people could not imagine earning a living as an artist. So, as things turned out, my brother went through Shivapur College and became a mining engineer, and I became a professional artist. But even after he became an engineer he did not stop painting.

He lived most of his life in the Railway Colony in Dhanbad. Here, in spite of his busy life as a mining engineer, he painted every day. Besides painting subjects like flowers in the garden, portraits of friends, people playing golf, small- or large-sized views of the mines, the embroidery designs he did for his friends' wives lay scattered in every household in the colony. Whenever he had a holiday, for Christmas or New Year's Day, he sat at home and fashioned various kinds of decorations for the local club, by day and by night, forgoing food and sleep. Even when I had started earning a livelihood, my colours, brushes, paper, rubber, pencils, all were provided to me by this brother of mine. He lived the life of an artist, even if he did not leave behind a name. I have known many such people who were taken all their lives with art or music. Which has led me to believe that the creative impulse is innate in man, even if its growth depends a great deal on the surrounding circumstances. This story of an unknown, ordinary individual may not be of interest to most. But I cannot forget the enthusiasm of this brother of mine when I stepped into the world of art. The strength you derive from public applause is so little, so miniscule in comparison with such love, support and faith that boosts your self-confidence—these last a whole lifetime.

Till this time I was quite innocent of any outside contact; I knew my father, mother, brothers, sisters, sisters-in-law; I hardly knew anyone else, young or old. So the influence of the family on my life was substantial. In our house there was plenty of intellectual discussion but little leaning for devotion or worship. Though there was no bar against these. Stated simply, our family was not puritanical. So I have had no occasion to listen to moral discourses. But I do recall one or two pieces of advice our parents had for us.

Values are, in a sense, contagious; they enter one's system as it were and dig their feet into one's personality after which their influence persists throughout one's life. My father, Bipinbihari, used to say, 'Do not tempt or cheat anyone'—he repeated this to all his sons. It may be that he did so because he had suffered heavily from both temptation and fraud in his life and wanted his sons to benefit from his experience. (Again), 'Always repay your debts even if you have to

starve for it.' As far as I can tell none of us tempted or cheated anyone or failed to honour our debts. My mother, Aparna Devi, used to say, 'It is better to trust people and suffer for it, than distrust people to gain your ends.' I confess I have not always been able to follow this advice to the letter, though I have always kept it in mind. It has taken me some time to realize its depth; I have observed that all suspicion rises from our weaknesses and distrust is harmful to the growth of humanity. Even though distrust may pay some dividends in our mundane lives, the force of my mother's advice is inescapable.

My father had seen some affluence in his early days and could not quite wipe out its memory from his mind. On the other hand my mother was the daughter of a pundit; a girl from an ordinary family. My brothers were often curious to know how rich our ancestors were and questioned our mother about this. But she always replied, 'What is the use of asking about what is no more? What I want is that you all learn to be happy with what you have.'

In those days, my doctor brother Banbihari was posted as the Doctor of the Godagadi Railway Colony.[4] And I heard that my mother and I were to go and stay with him. This was my first chance to go out of Calcutta. And this change was planned with a view to improve my health.

At Godagadi we found ourselves in a large bungalow with a thatched roof. There was an inner courtyard surrounded by a high wall, a row of rooms to the left, and another to the right. The kitchen, pantry, store and servant's quarters were accommodated in the latter. And when one came out of the rooms on the verandah one saw a huge clump *oimankochu* plants.

I had never before stayed in a thatched house or seen *mankochu* plants. The garden was huge, dark with banana trees on one side, covered with dense undergrowth elsewhere out of which some tomato plants broke out, here and there. Our cook and his wife stayed in the house. Our cook's name was Mahadev. He had never been anywhere except Samastipur[5] and Godagadi. My mother spent her time chatting with them or cooking. Both in the front and at the back of the house

huge trees grew out of the greenery, raising as it were a green wall from earth to sky. My brother went off to hospital in the morning and my mother to the kitchen and I walked out into the open, all by myself, to watch the trees. At some distance stood a *chhatim* tree. Through the knee-high grass and the stinking bush, you saw a *babla*[6] jungle spotted with large jackfruit and mango trees, thick with leaves. I came across all this and more, but not a single human being.

1 have tried many times to paint the Godagadi scene, without much success. Nevertheless, this childhood experience of the wilderness probably comes through here and there in certain works of mine.

In the afternoon, my brother returned from the hospital, finished his bath and lunch, sat on his bed and asked me, 'Bring one of those books by W. W. Jacob.' If I took some time to do so he would even spell out the title but never bother to get up himself. Then I would locate the book, a shiny cover showing a capped and bearded face, pipe in the mouth. Others had pictures of ships and sailors. Stretched out on the bed my brother would read the book, breaking now and again into fits of laughter.

In the evening a few chairs were put out in the open. Not many people visited us but the sanitary inspector came almost daily. He talked about his work in semi-Bengali Hindi. My brother had also got acquainted with a police officer in the course of treating him. He came in full dress, leggings, breeches, jacket, pistol on the hip. The three of us, the police officer, my brother and I, sat out together in the evening. They told each other stories of thefts and dacoities. The sun set; a man appeared lantern in hand; and the police officer took leave. After that my brother strolled around with me and showed me the stars. Through my glasses I could see the constellations—Orion, Great Bear and the rest. With people in the house two stray dogs ran around; they came uninvited and lay at our feet most of the time.

When the darkness thickened and lanterns were lit, we moved into the house. Inside the house we talked; often Mahadev came and joined us. He talked about Samastipur. He wanted to explain to us in various ways how big a town Samastipur was. If someone mentioned Calcutta, he was incredulous, insisting that there could not be any town larger than Samastipur.

My brother taught me to play chess—I had to sit and play with him now and then. We ate our dinner sitting in the verandah; in the lantern light frogs gathered on all sides to feast on insects. After dinner my brother and I moved into one room and my mother into another. Lying in our beds we talked for a long time. My brother repeated the stories he had read during the day; and while dropping off to sleep I could still hear my brother and mother talking to each other.

My life slowly got busier. I went with Mahadev to the Post Office, a small place with a tin roof. There were not many people around. Everywhere it was the same green and sun-washed yellow and the same smell of *chhecha mulo.*[7] After collecting the mail from the Post Office we walked home through the bazar. In the bazar we saw large fish—*chital, rut, katla*—you could buy one for two to five rupees. One hears of crowded bazars but this does not apply to Godagadi. 'Whoever buys all this fish and these vegetables?' I ask Mahadev. 'There are enough people,' says Mahadev, but I never saw many in this bazar. Sometimes I walked up to the hospital. The doctor sat in a thatched hut; the compounder's room, enclosed by a bamboo lattice, stood adjacent to this, with table, jars and bottles. For the patients there was a long shed with a thatched roof.

Though I never saw many people in Godagadi, snakes I saw a-plenty—*gokra, chandraboda, viditi, boda*[H] and the like. But *gokra* above all else; you saw it often, near the hearth or the kitchen store, amidst the stacks of cowdung cakes, on the staircase. Once a *gokra* crept into a hole in our bedroom and Mahadev went running to the hospital to fetch a man who arrived with a stick in one hand and a bottle of phenyl concentrate on the other. He poured the phenyl into the hole and saying, 'Where is it? I see no snake coming out. Maybe there isn't one!' went to pour a little more. Then, stiff as a stick, it darted out of the hole towards the bed, a veritable flying reptile! Harihar took a bash at it and broke its spine, but it did not die with that stroke. But it did not take him much longer to finish it. The snake was long and fat. Harihar said that it had sloughed off its skin; that's what made it so nasty.

One afternoon a group of people brought the body of a fairly large crocodile and threw it in front of the doctor's bungalow. It had

been found near the railway tracks. Possibly the luckless creature had got out of the water in the afternoon to bask in the sun and dragging itself up, slowly reached the side of the tracks. The locals got an iron bar from somewhere and thrust it into its open mouth; the more it edged forward the further this entered its belly. With that, and the beating they gave it with iron rods and sticks, it was dead in no time. They brought it to the doctor's bungalow expecting a reward. The sight of the crocodile awakened in my doctor brother's mind a desire to make himself a bag of crocodile skin. So it was dragged with ropes to the hospital. My brother got into a shirt in a huny and followed them. By the evening he returned with them and the crocodile skin. The skin was turned over and sprinkled thick with salt. It was decided I should keep guard on it from the morning; that it should be sprinkled with salt, dried and tanned. As the days passed it became hard for us to stay in the house due to the smell of rotting hide. And the dogs around nibbled away most of the sides. I did my duty; sprinkled salt, pulled it from one spot to another in the sun. Half-dried and torn apart by dog's teeth in this manner there was not much hide left except the back. And there ended our exercise in tanning.

We slowly got used to life in Godagadi. My mother stopped complaining that we had come to a jungle whenever we stepped out of the house. In the meantime she had also learnt from Mahadev's wife how to weave baskets, bowls and other small-containers with grass. So her afternoons passed well in making these and chatting with her. Then one day my brother came back from the hospital and announced, 'Our exile has ended, I have transfer orders.' Our things got tied up, and we came back to the concrete city of Calcutta. When the baggage was unloaded at home, there came with it a huge glass jar of spirit with two fist-sized cobra heads floating in it. The jar bore a sticker with the legend: 'In memory of Godagadi.'

After Godagadi all my childhood memories are centred around Paksi town. My brother became the Railway Doctor at Paksi.[9] Paksi was not desolate like Godagadi. It had made history with the building of the Hardinge Bridge, later called Sara Bridge. A two-storeyed building, about a mile from both the Sara Bridge and the railway station,

housed the doctor's quarters on the top, the hospital below. It had a garden in front, a green lawn, and a bunch of gardeners watering the lawn or plucking weeds. In the middle of the lawn stood a large *sthala padma* plant, what a striking sight! Bright white flowers broke out of buds; they turned gradually pink, red, then the colour of forged iron before they fell on the grass. I have seen many *sthala padma* plants in my life, but none that large.

The house was now full of people—father, mother, sisters, sisters-in-law, nieces and nephews. My brothers from Calcutta came to visit. The house rang with the sound of happy laughter mixed with the shrieks and shouts and giggles of children. The doctor's chamber was on the ground floor; in a side room was stored a mountainous heap of wooden splints which had probably been in daily use when the bridge was being built. Dust had settled on them; rarely was one taken out; even those were not put to real use. Their measurements, made to the limb sizes of sahebs, did not suit the limb sizes of the people of Pabna district.

All of us, six brothers, grew up together in the same house; but I got introduced to each in his characteristic image on some occasion or the other. Like I came to know my brother Bijan before the statue of Keshtodas Pal. Or my doctor brother in Godagadi. Or my next brother Biman at Paksi.

I went out with Biman every morning in quest of adventure. The Paksi town stood on the banks of the river Padma. Sara Ghat was on the opposite bank. From there people with good eyesight could see Rabindranath's country-house in Silaidaha. We took long walks along the Padma's banks. On one side of us were the garden-houses. In the evenings, fishing boats sailed close to the banks where people waited to buy fish; one could see, now and then, a white lady or two amongst them. Beyond that the river bent towards the market. We returned too by the river side, listening to the calls of various birds.

On certain days we set out towards the famous Pabna Road. It was a long road, with a dense jungle of *babla* trees on one side. This jungle was our main attraction. From it, tall *simul* trees stood out like the *chhatim* in Godagadi. One day we had gone quite far into this jungle

of *babla* and *simul* when Biman stopped suddenly and cried, 'Look, what a lot of bones! How did they come here?' Soon enough he noticed a flock of vultures. Raising his eyes he added, 'There are vultures on the trees too!' Then he told me, 'Let us go back now.' While coming out of the jungle he observed, 'If I had stayed longer the vultures would have given me the chase.' I had seen the bones. But had not noticed the vultures.

In the meanwhile we made ourselves a catapult. We rolled and dried small clay pellets which a Bihari trolley man fired for us. With these we prepared for the hunt. So far we had wandered aimlessly; now we were out to shoot birds down. With our bird-hunting equipment we went again to the *babla* jungle on the Pabna Road. The pellets flew but no bird fell dead.

One such evening while returning home after a long walk on the Pabna Road we passed a small village. The village was surrounded by clumps of bamboo. Biman lifted his catapult and took a quick shot and immediately started yelling with delight, 'The bird's been hit!' We went running, a small green *narun chora.* The blood-smeared body of the bird was lying on the earth. Except for the tail and the head the rest was a bloody mess. His first hit. All these days Biman had shot everywhere, amidst the trees, against the sky and returned home without success. Today he had his first hit. But he was far from happy. He stared at the bird for a long time. Then said, 'Such a tiny bird! I won't shoot birds any more!' We threw away the terracotta pellets we had made with so much effort and went home with the catapult. I do not know what happened to it but from the next day we reverted back to aimless peregrination.

One of those days it rained the whole morning. When the rain stopped, towards the afternoon, we got out and walked across the fields—not far from home. Biman suddenly got hold of my arm and said, 'See, what a long snake!' There it was—a long black ribbon-like thing on the grass, of which we could see neither the end nor the beginning. Asking me to wait, Biman went forward and then announced with a sky-piercing shout, 'Hey, no snake, just fish!' A whole row of *koi*fish were hurtling towards a tree from the waterlogged

ground. Some had already caught hold of the roots and climbed on the branches while some slipped back to the ground. The rainwater was draining off the sloping ground, but the *koi* fish were moving in the opposite direction. Fantastic sight! I must have been nine or ten years old then, but I still remember that strange scene. I have also told many people about it. Biman said, 'We can't leave such a lot of fish here and walk away.' He immediately took off *his panjabi* and knotted it into a bag. Then we got busy pushing them in and walked back home with a bag bursting with fish.

Reaching home Biman shouted, 'Come and look how big this snake is!' and let the fish out on the verandah. Everyone came out, including the children, asking 'Where is the snake?' Seeing so many *koi* fish wriggling around the children broke into shrieks, whether out of fear or delight it was hard to tell.

Not far from the hospital stood a gigantic *peepal* tree. When the shadows of the evening thickened, sitting on the verandah upstairs we heard the giant owl's hooting. My doctor brother had a batter)' of servants; one day he set them to catch the owl. He wanted to explain to us why the giant owl cannot see in daylight. It was kept to start with in the dark room meant for eye examinations; as soon as it entered the dark room the sound of its hooting could be heard. When it was felt that it had overcome its fright, it was brought out into the daylight. With wings tied up the owl sat on the cement floor, impassive like a statue. The wooden staircase, the electric candelabra hanging from the ceiling, the Pasteur filter, the clock and amidst these this giant owl with large yellow eyes! It was a fantastic scene! Even the grownups were startled to see the owl in this setup, notjust me. It looked as if I was seeing an owl in every person, like in a surrealist painting.

These are just some trivial incidents from my childhood but I cannot pass them by. They glow in one's mind like the pure light of life's dawn. The people associated with these little memories have all left the world but the *sthala padma,* the string offish, this giant owl, are all tied up with their memories.

In between, Biman left for Calcutta along with my sister. I was lonely though not quite—Biman had managed to shake me out of my

previous day. The door was closed but through the grilled window one could see her sitting, back against the wall, legs outstretched, clenched fists in her lap. Another stone figure. In the next room father was telling mother, 'Go and sit with her for a while.' 'I cannot, you do that,' my mother cried out shrilly.

Between the house and the open world twelve years had passed. I sat at home and read books or painted, as I pleased. Everyone went to school, I didn't—but this hurt no more. And when this unnatural infancy and childhood was settling down to a state of naturalness, I heard that I was going to be put in 'Rabi-babu's school'[10] in Bolpur. About this time my brother had got to know Kalimohan Ghosh,[11] a teacher in the Brahmacharyasram,[12] with whose help arrangements were being made for my enrolment.

So one day I set out for Bolpur with Biman, carrying a set of khadi shorts and half-sleeved shirts in my suitcase. A tin-roofed guest house stood under a *gab* tree and the students of Brahmacharyasram served the guests without reserve. We could not meet Rabindranath the next morning, we met him in the evening. Kalimohan-babu led us through the *sal* avenue and stopped in front of'Dehali',[13] Rabindranath's residence. 'Have you ever seen Rabindranath?' Kalimohan-babu asked me. 'No, sir.' 'His photograph?' 'Yes, sir.' Will you recognize him if you see him?' 'Yes, sir.' 'Then go up these stairs. His room is up there. Once you get there, do a pranam and give answers to whatever questions he puts you.'

I put my shoes away at the bottom of the strairs and went up. His door was open; I went in and touched his feet in pranam. The room was extremely small; between the table and the chair I could not reach his feet. Then I straightened up, stood before him. For a while Rabindranath looked me in the face. He then ran his eyes down to my feet. Then he looked up again at my face. 'Have your eyes been examined by a good doctor?' 'Yes, sir, Maynard-saheb examined them.' 'Here you have to do everything yourself, sweep the room, wash the clothes, clean the dishes, can you do all this?' asked Rabindranath. 'Yes, sir, I can.' 'Have you read any of my writings?' 'Yes, sir,' I

answered. I then told him what books I had read in English and Bengali including Michael's *Meghnadvadh Kavya*[14] and the like. He was a little surprised to hear I had read *Meghnadvadh Kavya.* He then said, 'Send upstairs whoever has come with you.' Coming down, I gave this message to Kalimohan-babu who then went upstairs. When he came down alter a few minutes he placed his hand on my back and said with a smile, 'Well, Gurudev has agreed to enrol you' and to my brother who was with me, he said, 'He gave his consent gladly.'

I was put in the Natyaghar.[15] Jagadananda-babu[16] was its warden at that time. In my case they relaxed some of their rules; knowing that I could not take part in the games on the sports field they allowed me, instead, to go for walks in the evenings. I was also exempted from various other small things. Although the Brahmacharyasram did not hold any aptitude tests, the teachers discovered the tastes and temperaments of each student soon enough—who could sing, who had a talent for acting, who could write. Both Gurudev and the warden came to know all this within a few days. So also they came to know that I could paint, though not much else. Jagadananda-babu was writing his book *Poka Makad* (Insects) those days. I made for it the drawing of a centipede. Though I was scared of worms and centipedes, I was even more scared of Jagadananda-babu so I did it with proper care in pen and ink. The book was printed with this illustration and Jagadananda-babu mentioned my name in the preface. He had already informed Gurudev of my talent. This raised me up in the estimation of the class; and to almost everyone in the Brahmacharyasram I came to be known as the artist, overnight.

I entered the Brahmacharyasram at a time when it was being restructured. The concept of Visva-Bharati,[17] incorporating Art, Music, Research was taking shape in Rabindranath's mind. So Kala Bhavana[18] was announced even before Visva-Bharati was formally instituted. One morning, while going to the class as usual with books and mat, I came upon Dhirendrakrishna[19] under the *sal* trees. Dhirendrakrishna said, 'Gurudev is opening Kala Bhavana. All of us who want to paint can go there. I have already done so—why don't you

come along too?' His enthusiasm exceeded mine. He took me immediately to the Adyaksha Vidhusekhar Shastri.[20] I was still holding on to my books and mat. That a new department called Kala Bhavana had been opened was not yet known to Vidhusekhar Shastri. All the same, I was allowed to join Kala Bhavana on the assurance that I would get written permission from home. After this Dhirenkrishna took me to Jagadananda-babu. He too was taken by surprise when he heard about it. 'Kala Bhavan! When did that come into being?' he exclaimed. When he heard the whole story he gave us permission and we lost no time in moving, bag and baggage, into a small room in Samindra Kutir.[21] Dhirenkrishna proposed, 'Let us stay in the same room, you and I.' Samindra Kutir was still under construction. It was covered on all sides with scaffolding and strewn around with brick, lime and sand. In the adjoining room Ardhenduprasad, Hirachand and Krishnakinkar[22] stayed, all of them much older than me. They had been receiving training under Asit-babu[23] in the Calcutta Art School and had come to Santiniketan at his bidding.

Kala Bhavana was housed in those days on the first floor of Dvarik;[24] Sangeet Bhavana[25] downstairs. A grass mat, a wobbly water stand in front, a water pot to the right, I found myself amidst these like all the rest. For quite some time I did not find favour with Nandalal.[26] He felt that Gurudev had forced on him someone who was ill-equipped for an artist's career. How could anyone paint when he could hardly see?

When Gurudev visited Kala Bhavana one morning Nanda-babu put my case up to him and expressed his reservations. Gurudev said, 'Nandalal, does he do his work?' 'Oh yes, he is an involved student but in this line . . . ' Rabindranath cut him short and said, 'If he sits in his assigned place and works with interest, let him be. Don't worry about his future. Let each find his own way out.'

Nandalal did not deny me mat, desk, water pot and all the rest but while he taught the others he left me alone. As the days passed I painted, sketched and showed it to friends. Ait School-trained Ardhendu and Hirachand assured me, 'Don't you worry, Benode, we shall stipple and finish your paintings for you.' Compared to them I was quite a novice. So I went on working in my own way.

In the afternoons most of us looked at paintings. About this time I came upon a painting on a wooden box. The box bore the inscription—W. W. Pearson,[27] *Rock and Water*—the artist's name was Serayu.[28] For whatever reason I liked the painting very much and saw it over and over again. In the process I too wanted to do a long painting. I did one on a piece of paper, one span broad and four or five long. A long line of *sal* tree trunks . . . which squirrels ran up and down or around. When the painting was nearing completion all my friends said with one voice, 'There is a serious defect in the composition, cut it up.' Then, with my consent, they cut it into three pieces. I felt, with them, dial this improved the painting a lot. But by a curious quirk of fate when I was sitting next day with a piece of white paper and planning a new painting, Nanda-babu came and stood before me and asked, 'Where is that long painting of yours?' Timorously, I took out the divided painting from under the board and placed it on the table. ''Why did you cut up the painting?' he asked. 'The composition was defective,' I said. 'Who told you the composition was defective?' his voice was hard. I had to tell him the truth. He picked up the pieces and took my mentors to the next room. After a while he came back and. handing over the three pieces, said, 'Hereafter you will bring the paintings to me for advice, not others.' I heard later that there was nothing wrong with the composition of the painting and he had explained so to my friends with great care.

In the meanwhile, Ramendranath,[29] a student of Asitkumar, came from Calcutta. Then, from Bombay, came Vinayak Masoji,[30] tall, well-built, a noted sportsman of the Bombay province, peerless in pole-vaulting. From Andhra came Veerabhadra Rao Chitra,[31] short, but bouncy like a rubber ball. From Dacca came Manindrabhusan Gupta[32] on the wave of the Non-Cooperation Movement. And from Bankura, Satyendranath.[33] Each one was different in looks, temperament and talent, and each was trying to hew out an individual path for himself. Dhirenkrishna came dressed in a *panjabi* of sheer material, sash at the waist, *esraj* in hand. He worked in the wash technique—damped paper and kit it stretched on the board, then for a while played on the *esraj* or sang. On the other hand was Ardhenduprasad who wore a pince-

nez—the thread of which he changed daily—and used strong perfume. Kramrisch[34] referred to him as 'the young man with strong scent.' Satyendranath painted on themes drawn from family or village life or, occasionally, mythology. Abanindranath[35] and Nandalal were his ideals. Ramendranath painted and read about the life and work of the Japanese artist Hokusai. Then, one day, he started doing woodcuts. Manindrabhushan Gupta was a serious sort, always work-engrossed; he engraved on slate, painted, learnt French in the department of literature of the Visva-Bharati and made attempts to learn Chinese.

Our lifestyles also differed considerably. One group went out sketching; another rarely did so. Nor were the material circumstances of each person the same. Those in economic stress cooked their own meals, went to the market to shop, went to Bolpur to buy rice and *dal.* But we all grew up together like trees of various kinds in the open field. Nandalal did not try to prune us all into the same shape by his teaching system. Often, Rabindranath came to attend meetings; those days most meetings were held upstairs. His newly composed songs and poems were rehearsed or read first in that room. To that same room in Dvarik Rabindranath brought his paintings to show to Nandalal for the first time. Meetings of the Visva-Bharati's *Samsad*[ie] too were held there in the beginning; we got to hear Prasanta Mahalonabis[37] and Tapan Chatterjee arguing over the ordinances. As neither would give in, the discussion went on endlessly, even after the meetings broke up. Between sessions of painting, these discussions were quite diverting to listen to.

We were doing well; the constitutional noose of the Visva-Bharati had not yet fallen around our necks. So we ran our affairs in our own individual ways. Amongst those who had made a name for themselves in the meanwhile Dhirenkrishna was foremost; Abanindranath had bought one of his paintings, Nandalal had accepted him as his true successor. Asitkumar observed, 'Dhiren, you certainly have been able to lay your hands on Nandalal's skills!' Ordhendu Gangopadhyay[38] acknowledged, in an article in the journal *Rupam,*'^[9] that one could see the promise of modernism in the young artists of Kala Bhavana. Paintings of Ardhenduprasad, Hirachand, Satyen Bandyopadhyay

and others got into print. In his booklet, *Priyadarshika,* Abanindranath stated that these young artists had been able to usher into the exhibitions 'an atmosphere of open air and light.' My painting *Winter Morning* was, lor the first time, mentioned in this review and reproduced in the same number of *Pravasi*[40] that reproduced Abanindranath's *Trayi.* I lere I saw my name in print for the second time. I need hardly repeat that I found it very gratifying.

Amongst the students of the early years I have not mentioned Prabhatmohan.[41] He already had a reputation as a poet when he entered Kala Bhavana. His paint-box, sketch-books and all the rest bore labels with his name. We used to poke fun at him for this childish obsession. But I have since realized that when you are young it is specially satisfying to see, and show off, your name in print.

Till then, I had not been able to do any romantic or mythological painting. The subject of my paintings was the local scene or Santhal life. But amongst the paintings of this time there was one exception, in my whole career as an artist. It was the *Pillared Verandah.* Done on the lines of Abanindranath's *Death ofShahJehan.* A prince is sitting on the throne, dressed and turbaned in the Mughal style. By his side a Persian girl plays a sarangi-like instrument and between them is a table carrying fruits and a jug of wine. At that time Nandalal had gone to Calcutta to set up the stage for a Rabindranath play with those students of Kala Bhavana who could sing or play an instrument. On his return he saw my painting and praised it. In spite of this praise I never made any further attempt to do that sort of painting again in my life. The painting was sold. This was the first time I made some money by the sale of a painting. During those days in Kala Bhavana (at Dvarik) I realized to some extent that although we all stayed together, we were, each, distinct in the field of art.

I had not seen Abanindranath so far. Nandalal told me (one day), 'Go and meet Abanindranath once, with your paintings.' I set out for Calcutta with four paintings. I presented myself at Jorasanko the following morning. I had heard many stories about the first-floor verandah[1]-' where Abanindranath, Gaganendranath and Samarendranath worked. Abanindranath was sitting between his two brothers. He was silling on a chair, one leg lifted up on his lap, the other hanging free.

He was working over a board resting on his lap. Picking up the first painting, he asked, 'What have you shown here?' 'Man playing flute.' 'Playing flute or eating banana?' The second showed a hunter with a bow, trees on all sides, fire-flies glittering in the trees. Abanindranath looked at the painting a little and said, 'Keep it. This time I shall also enter the painting of a hunter in the exhibition. Let us see whose is better.' He handed back the other two paintings without any comment saying, 'I do not want to look at dirty colour. Seeing such works of yours will spoil mine too. Now show your work to Dada.' Gaganendranath took all the four paintings together and picked the 'Flute Player' painting first. A Santhal boy was sitting on the branch of a tree and playing the flute. 'Do you know how to play the flute?' he asked. 'Try blowing into a flute and you will realize your mistake. The colours of your paintings are a little dirty and the same in each. See my painting. See how clean the paper is. Try to work cleanly, like this. Have you taken enough pains with each of your works?' 'Yes sir'. Now, addressing Abanindranath, he said, 'Aban, if everyone painted like you, when will there be a new painting? When you did your new painting, did people not appreciate them? He has taken pains, he has painted what appealed to him, he has not copied from anyone's work, did you mark that?' Then he returned my paintings and said, 'Your work is certainly novel, but don't mess the paper up so much. Go, do what he asks you to do.' So I went and stood before Abanindranath again. Abanindranath exclaimed, 'Good lord! Dada has passed your work! So I have nothing more to say. Give the paintings in for the exhibition.' While I was coming out Samarendranath stopped and saw my work and added, 'Good, beautiful work.'

I went to the exhibition in Calcutta. That afternoon Abanindranath was sitting in a chair in the exhibition hall. Before I could pay my respects, he said, 'Go and look, I too have a painted a hunter. I have kept it side by side with yours. See whose is better.' I spotted Abanindranath's painting of the hunter. A man dragging a young deer by a rope tied round its neck. A cruel expression on his face. I presume there wasn't anything else in the picture. The colour was light ochre—next to it hung my dark-coloured painting of the

hunter. What I learnt in a flash that day no one could have taught me with a long lecture.

We got our first taste of creative pleasure in the Dvarik building, and its story would have gone on, if we were not obliged to leave it. We were informed we had to move into the newly built Samindra Kutir. And when the time came we went and occupied the building with all our things.

I firmly believe that an artist gets his personal insight or basic inspiration quite early in his life; it is thereafter enriched by further experience and practice. By the time we left Dvarik it seemed that we all had found our directions. I, for myself, had realized that painting mythological pictures was not my forte and made no bones about this while talking to friends. Nandalal was a little particular about the gravity of the subject matter; he said, 'To give form to a big idea you need a big mind; conversely, a mind grows big by tackling big ideas.' True, he also said that if there is emotional depth everything is good and proper. I could not warm up to Asitkumar's metaphorical paintings, f never tried to, even by mistake. In spite of all this talk even Nandalal's and Asitkumar's paintings were moving closer to the earth. In their case this came as a change; in ours this was there from the beginning. So far our attitudes, my friends' and mine, had not changed with any change of place. A change in our artistic attitude started after we moved into the first floor of the library building.

So far my days were spent far from the normal life stream of the institution—on the roadside, watching the passers-by morning and evening, watching the sunrise, painting or thinking about a painting. When we moved into the first floor of the library building, there were some changes in both atmosphere and attitude. To the left the *sal* avenue, classes under trees, boys and girls walking around with their mats; in front, the gate, the grounds and the hostel, some *kanchan* trees in front of the hostel, then to its left some large-leaved teak trees touching its walls and two palms. A portion of the ground floor of the library building was in the possession of the pandits; the rest was the library.

My childhood was spent amidst books; now the sight of books stacked in the library aroused my desire to read and I set about it with new enthusiasm. Till now I did not have any acquaintance with the students of Vidya Bhavana; this started while we were on the first floor of the library building. Many of those who had joined Visva-Bharati at that time have left behind proof of their brilliant talent; they visited Kala Bhavana out of genuine curiosity and we, on our side, put to them many questions. Those things they did not know, they studied and answered. We too demonstrated to them our work methods and styles. In short, we had ample opportunity to exchange notes. I have a feeling that, in the Visva-Bharati of those days, there was hardly any teacher or student who was not alert. I may be wrong, but such a notion persists. And many of those who were engrossed in research were also capable of disarming light-heartedness and humour; after all humour too is an expression of life's energy. So there was no dearth, those days, of light talk and laughter, To pore over books and commit them to memoiy was not the final objective of the students of that time; they knew the value of culture.

Till then I had spent my days and nights, painting or thinking about painting. On moonlit nights I sat under trees and made charcoal drawings of their shadows on large sheets of paper. I had yet no inkling of what was known as life's struggle. In time, various problems started nettling me. The topmost was pecuniary. Most of those I had started painting with had already gone out to seek jobs. Some returned after short stints at temporary jobs and waited for new calls. Some had got married; a few others were gearing themselves up to do so.

I started teaching drawing in the junior school. The remuneration was meagre but I was already a past-master at making do with little. But I could not continue in this teaching job for long. I could not control the class and gave up the bother. But money was still a worry.

All my teachers and friends were aware that I could not go out into the world and do a normal job. I certainly could not get a government job, nor could I keep pace with the fast traffic of a big city. These were certain home-truths, which they knew as well as I. So, I was given another assignment—the arrangement and administration of the Kala Bhavana Library. Or, to put it simply, I became a librarian.

In the meanwhile Ramkinkar,[43] Sukumar Deuskar,[44] Sudhir Khastagir[45] etc., famous artists of later days, had joined Kala Bhavana. Also many new students of both sexes. By then a kind of distance had grown between the old and the new. None of my old friends were around; I was alone. *Khoai,* the *sal* forest of Surul, the banks of the Kopai River—these were my steadfast companions, I did paintings based on them. Then there was a strange incident.

I was doing a painting of *kaash* flowers. It started off in natural colours. When it was nearing completion I dreamt one night, in the hours preceding sunrise, that I was painting the whole background red. The light of the dawn was just breaking; the rooms were still dark. I sat up to work and mixed a fair amount of vermillion colour. Then as soon as it was light, I painted the background with this vermillion. White *kaash* flowers on a bright red background. Then I put away the colours and brushes and came and slept on the verandah. When everyone came to work in the morning, Nandalal was taken aback to see the painting. 'You laid on so much red!', he remarked. It took me very little effort to finish the painting; just tidying up those portions where the red overlapped the white flowers. And changing the blue sky into yellow. This was probably my first high-coloured painting. In all the paintings I had done earlier, or did later, I was more economical in my use of colour.

Though such episodes as this, of my life or of others, should not be of interest to posterity, I mention them nevertheless. For I know that if one is taken with a certain issue night and day with both mind and body, some unexpected solutions emerge.

About this time a number of illustrious academics like Levi[46] and Winternitz[47] came to Santiniketan and, side by side, some rather strange characters. There were one or two artists among them. I particularly remember two. First a foreign artist who came riding on a bicycle and whom we came to refer to as 'the bohemian artist'. He had brought some of his works with him, and did some others during his stay in Santiniketan. Prominent amongst which was a portrait of Rabindranath on glass. The painting was done in different shades of

green and the background was studded with stars. The total effect reminded one of moss. The technique he used to get this colour effect may be worth mentioning here. He presented it in a chart showing colour equivalents for various natural factors like light, heat, humidity and the like or vice versa. The intention was to be true to Nature. But in practice everything became green. He was never able to explain satisfactorily why all his paintings became green or why he devised the chart in the first instance. It was his earnest wish that we should follow his chart in Kala Bhavana. Generally (going by the works we had seen) he worked on silk with fine brushes. They all ended up looking like moss-coloured oleographs. He wore an ancient black suit, was large in build, and took deep breaths from time to time—this I remember. The painting he did of Rabindranth on glass was exhibited in Kala Bhavana. But, unfortunately, a strong wind blew it to the ground, shattering it into fragments. When the artist saw the mishap he declared that Rabindranath's soul had flown away from the painting. Then he left one day, loading all his things on his bicycle, as abruptly as he had come.

Some years after 'the bohemian artist' left the scene, came artist Kothari, trained in the Florence Academy. He was short-statured and sallow faced, and wore ochre coloured clothes. He announced to Nandalal in the very beginning that he had come to establish an academy. At that time the inmates of Santiniketan were very tolerant; Nandalal said, 'Good, stay here, do your work and teach our students.' But the artist said, 'I won't do anything myself; I have taken a vow that as long as I have not established an academy I won't touch colour and brush.' We were eager to see his wwork so we told him, 'Please paint,we want to watch!' Nandalal said, 'When you start painting, the academy will get established by itself.' But Kothari insisted, 'I will not do anything with my hand. I am your brains, you are my hands.' Everyone started doubting whether he was an artist at all or had ever seen the shores of Italy. Noticing our distrust he said, one day, 'I will show you proof.' He took out a leather folder from a small wooden box and showed it to us. Inside it were two passport-sized photographs; one of Kothari dressed in a suit, and facing it, on the other side, an Italian

girl. He also produced the certificate from the Florence Academy which said he had completed his training there. 'Now you will not disbelieve me?' Kothari asked. Whatever he had said was true—undoubtedly he was an artist trained in Italy. But why had he taken that vow? The mystery cleared in the end. Kothari told us he had got engaged to that girl and promised her that he would establish an academy in India and then return to marry her. But for fifteen years they had not seen each other. He did not know where the girl was now nor her present address. Still he hoped that as soon as he set up the academy she would come to him. It all sounded like a madman's ravings. He would bring home a girl he hadn't seen for fifteen years and marry her—what sense did that make? He would not paint but nevertheless set up an academy? How can a normal, educated, intelligent man harbour such notions? Kothari said, 'I thought I would find a place in Rabindranath's ashram. When I haven't, what's the use of living? The only road open to me is to commit suicide.'

Both 'the bohemian artist' and Kothari were simple star-crossed people athough I still cannot figure out whether they were normal or abnormal.

In the summer vacation the Santiniketan ashram assumed a new look. When the school was open, all work followed the ringing of the bells but no sooner did the children go on vacation than the ringing stopped. It seemed as if the whole environment became lifeless; no sound, no movement, hardly any people. Dogs ran around madly in search of food, ate banyan fruits with a crackling noise and slept in the shadows of trees, corners of verandahs or in the vicinity of bathrooms and wells. There was plenty of time for work, I arranged my studio and sat down to work. I came across just a few people in the mornings and evenings, exchanged words with those I didn't know, and they became my vacation friends or companions. Towards evening the heat came down with a sudden gale and a light shower. Then you spent the night in peace. This gives a rough picture of the summer vacation.

But slowly the scene changed; the rainstorms of Jaishtha took on a frightful visage. Towards evening violent winds blew away tin roofs

or thatch, broke doors and windows and rainwater drenched everything in the house. This was another kind of experience. While the rain revived the plants and trees, the heat became harsher. Dry leaves lay thick all around and in the night's wind went rolling along the ground with a rustling noise. When the wind stopped this stopped too. The sound of the moving leaves in the dark night was so unusual that it seemed like an eerie, ghostly experience. Then, the. experience of wandering barefoot, bareheaded in the summer noons, on village roads or along the ridges of the *khoai.* This became rare as time went on, sounding like a fairy tale to people who heard of it. When the summer vacation starts now, I still recall those noons and dark nights. That desolation is perhaps one of the main themes in my landscapes. I often wonder where I got my early training from? From Nandalal, the library or this stark environment of Santiniketan? Without Nandalal I would not have learned my skills, without the library known what I know and without the experience of that stark image of Nature, painted as I did.

This experience of Nature and this phase of work ended with my stay in the first floor of the library. Thereafter started a new life in a new environment and my human contacts became closer.

Whatever is significant in my life has found expression in my painting; without seeing my painting no one can know my life's essence. There is another side to life—teaching, job, etc., this is common to all lives—and here my life is not distinct from that of anyone else in a middle-class family. As a child, I witnessed the Swadeshi Movement—processions on the streets, the marchers playing harmoniums tied to their waists and singing *'Banga amarjaani amar'* (Bengal, my land, my mother); youth marching while reciting *'Beth mere ki ma bholabi, ami ki maa-r shei chheleV* (Am I such a son as can be flogged to forget his mother?) On the other hand, I have seen young men buying *paans* and throwing them in the drain, to demonstrate their rejection of luxury. These were all part of my childhood experiences. The Gandhian movement started in my early youth; under its influence I wore homespun, gave up cigarettes for *bidis,* even tried a bit to spin on the *takli.* But nothing more. So there have been no astonishing or unusual incidents in my life that need special mention.

During the Non-Cooperation Movement a friend of mine asked me if 1 was not ashamed to sit rubbing paint on paper in such days of national distress. But I have done precisely that all my life. Without any sense of shame. The fact is that my temperament does not let me identify myself with any social responsibility. The recent history of India and Pakistan unrolled before my eyes; there was famine, flood, earthquake but I could not relate myself with any of these too closely, nor do any paintings based on them.

My objectives have always been around an artist's ultimates. I have sought to know myself and in the process unfold it to others, never forgetting that 1 am just one amongst many.

I went to Japan for a few months in 1938 fired by the same desire. I did not see very much of the natural beauty of Japan; even of the city of Tokyo, where I stayed, I saw little. I spent all my time visiting museums and artists' studios. When I went to Japan the country was facing a big historical crisis. 1 arrived in Tokyo in winter. It began to snow soon after I reached and, side by side, the national flags of Japan and Germany were unfurled as a sign of friendship. There was machine-gun practice in the outskirts of the city; the sound echoed everywhere. The whole city was white with snow but one could notice easily that the. blood of the Japanese was warming up; even a foreigner like me could tell. In the talk of those painters who worked in the pure Japanese style there was no trace of it but from time to time a wave of heat burst forth from the modern, Paris-educated artists and youth. One saw, now and then, newspaper announcements about an artist who had returned from France and declared that he was giving up his French witi.' and French colours and brushes and would hereafter take to Japanese brush techniques.

Takakusu,[48] a great Buddhist scholar and admirer of Rabindranath, told me that their recent specialists were making an effort to prove that they got their Buddhism straight from India, not through China; or at most, through Korea. For this reason some of their historians were unhappy when I mentioned to them that I preferred Sotatsu's[49] work to that of Korin;"'[0] they remarked that Sotatsu, after all, imitated the Chinese! FromTakakusu's statement one can get

some indication of how much Sinophobia influenced the views of Japanese scholars in those years preceding the Second World War.

But this was not what I had gone to study. I had gone there to make personal contacts with Japanese artists and understand the inner spirit of Japanese art. The Japanese artists (of that time) were influenced greatly by the Impressionists. They had also absorbed well the lessons of Matisse. A large number of Paris-returned Japanese were also trying to review and analyse their country's traditions. Surrealism had just then raised its head in Tokyo; it had not yet been fully grasped by the Japanese artists.

In those days there were many studios in Tokyo with special facilities for life study and portrait painting; the classes were run by individual artists and the methods of teaching were not particularly different from those of our art schools. But in comparison, the competence of those artists in drawing and painting was considerably superior to that of their Indian contemporaries.

Through the good offices of Rashbehari Bose[51] I was introduced, at that time, to an organization trying to establish contact between the Japanese and other Oriental cultures. They also provided 'guides' to foreigners when needed. The name of the guide they provided me with was Hawgo. Educated in the Imperial University of Japan this young man was sufficiently informed about Japanese art. During the few months I stayed in Tokyo Hango informed me every morning of where which exhibition was on and with which artist he could arrange an interview. Through Hango's efforts I got to meet a famous artist of Japan, Takeuchi Seiho.[52] Takeuchi was then more than seventy years old. As a young man he had travelled to Germany and Italy. But he admitted that he was a follower of the South Chinese tradition. In his view the new artists were adept at technique but gave little attention to experience. 'We learned our techniques through experience,' he said, 'only the artist's mind can know when the ink has to be thin or thick or when the brush should sweep like a hurricane or move slowly and softly. Can one paint without this experience?'

At the end of our talk he took out a reproduction of the well-known painting of Abanindranath, *Old Toy,* and told me, 'This painting is beautiful. Does this artist paint portraits?' I said that in his early

youth the artist had learned portrait painting and thereafter did portraits from time to time. Takeuchi remarked, 'He could have become a great portrait painter.' During our long talk I could not see in him any rancour against the Chinese tradition. Instead he said, 'We have got many things from the Chinese. What has an artist to do with politics?' Taikan[53] said the opposite. Because, at that time, the Japanese government patronized him and he visited, in the years before the war, Germany and Italy as a cultural envoy of the Japanese. Hango told me that, at one time, Taikan had fought against the state's interference in art but now, had moved away from such thought. Saying that he added immediately, 'I am sorry. Do not mention this to any one else, not even your Indian friends.'

Slowly Hango almost became a friend. I got from him all kinds of information about the prevalent state of affairs in Japan. One day when 1 asked him a question about the 'tea ceremony' he replied with some heat. 'The tea ceremony is an amusement for counts and barons—it is not a thing for people like us.' I came to discover slowly that Hango's black overcoat had a red lining. He drew me a picture of how poor the people in the villages were and how the country's wealth was being drained off in preparation for war.

One evening, while returning from an exhibition, Hango said, 'There is a small park close by, come, let us sit there for a while.' The park was empty except for an old woman with a pushcart. In the cart were Japanese cakes wrapped in colourful paper. Hango bought two. And asked me, 'Kindly buy two'. After buying them, he put the cakes back in the cart and asked me to do likewise. I was intrigued by this mysterious action of Hango's—why were the cakes, bought for good money in the first instance, put back, with the money? Coming out of the park, Hango said, "Those cakes are unfit for eating. Begging is banned in the streets of Tokyo, thus this arrangement. Our outside is colourful but the inside is hollow.' Then he posed the question, 'For whose sake are we going to war? Who is our enemy? And what will be the final outcome of this German-Japanese pact? Can you tell me?'

After returning home I corresponded with Hango regularly for quite sometime; but early in 1940 he wrote me a letter to say that we had better call off the correspondence.

Those who know the history of the school of Abanindranath should be familiar with the name of Kempo Arai.[54] While in Japan I received from him many kinds of assistance. I have still not forgotten all that he explained to me about the classical techniques of Japanese painting, through active demonstration. When I first met him, he was painting a screen to go on the ceiling of a hotel. Arai asked me, 'See if this Indian flower is all right or not.' Actually there was a major mistake in the painting—he had combined the flowers of *potash* with the *ashok's* long leaves. When I pointed this out to him he laughed aloud saying, 'How did this happen?' Then he made me elaborate on the form and character of the *potash* tree but added, 'No I cannot use those leaves but you will see, I will manage them somehow.'

He gave me an opportunity to watch how he taught his students. He made his students learn Toba Sojo's lines by heart. He held the view that if one got a proper grip on Toba Sojo's lines one could easily grasp all the other lines in Japanese painting—in Toba Sojo's line he can observe all possible kinds of stroke play. And he made many other small observations of this kind. But I should describe here the most valuable experience of all.

On the occasion of the Japanese New Year Arai received plenty of commissions. Mostly from hotels. He would sit down to work round eight in the morning and, on pieces of Japanese paper of the prescribed size for a *kakemono,* would go on working at lightning speed till sunset. A round red sun in the upper part of the picture surface, fishes below, a few lines to signify water, then affixing the seal and putting this piece aside, he drew another forward. After taking two puffs from a cherry cigarette and sticking it in the coal-tray the work started again. Every few minutes Arai's wife came in, put clean dishes for colour, took away the soiled ones; their lifting and placing led to a continuous tinkling sound. Painting, washing dishes, the puffing of cigarettes by Arai—all together it seemed like a factory.

It is almost sunset; Arai has set a paper in front of him and leisurely lit his cigarette. His wife rushes in and says, 'The man has come.' Arai replies, 'Wait.' And without a word stamps his seal on different parts of the paper and in a flash draws two thick lines from bottom to top.

At the top of the lines he makes two touches of heavy black ink, resembling toad-stools. Forestalling a question he tells me, 'Sea anemone—we eat them—I cannot think of anything else!'

Then he tells his wife, 'Call him.' The buyer places a thick wad of notes on one side of Arai and then, in no time, the paintings are rolled and taken away. Arai does not check the money, the buyer does not count the paintings. With a little yawn Arai says, 'Sat to work at eight, I am tired now.'

Before I came back home there was an exhibition of my paintings; the same society I had connections with, and which gave me Hango as guide, sponsored it. When I sat and painted for this exhibition Arai often dropped by in the afternoons and discussed the paintings. In the end, it was he who selected the paintings for the exhibition. On the days Arai did not come Oba-San[55] of Asia Lodge came into the room, sat against the wall, legs outstretched, and made all kinds of insects, birds, dragonflies, butterflies and the like with cigarette foil and kept them on the table. I showed this handiwork of Oba-San to many educated Japanese who all said that such hand-skills were, unfortunately, disappearing from educated society. Oba-San also brought me Japanese tea; she served me tea as often as I wanted. And in-between, she also fed me with half-grilled fish, seasoned with lime. In the mean while, thanks to Rashbehari Bose, my name had appeared a few times in the Japanese press.

To put it briefly: I had by then become familiar to some extent to the circle of artists and critics in Tokyo. Thus the exhibition was well-attended and publicized. Hango and I spent the whole day at the exhibition. Hango explained to me in English what the viewers said or commented on, and added, 'The exhibition has gone off very well. You are highly appreciated by modern artists.'

I have not mentioned the name of Saichi Taki,[56] the famous (art) historian. He introduced me to Akiyama,[57] the Director of the Museum and said, 'Akiyama will help you to see whatever you want in this museum.' And Akiyama did. Without his help I would not have been able to see the sketchbooks of various artists or other work, as minutely. Taki advised me many times to learn the Japanese language

but I did not follow his advice. He was disappointed with this and held it against me. In the end he said, 'If you had learned the Japanese language it would have profited you in many ways.'

After I returned to Santiniketan I started to experiment with techniques afresh. I announced to all the boys and girls of Kala Bhavana that I would do a painting for whoever brought me mounted silk or paper. My flower paintings started in this manner. By the time I set to work on the ceiling of the Kala Bhavana hostel in 1940, my brush work and methods of laying colour had undergone a distinct change.

Many have posed the question: what have you got from Rabindranath? This is hard to answer. Because I was born in the Rabindric era. As a child, I had probably started reading Rabindranath's poems as soon as I finished the two primers of Vidyasagar.[58] By that time Rabindranath's poems had started finding a place in some of the text books. My literary judgement was also to a large extent influenced by him. His work was read regularly at home. In the journal *Nayak* edited by Panchkaudi Bandyopadhyay, amusing cartoons and criticisms of Rabindranth used to appear. I still remember one cartoon in which Rabindrantath is sitting on the top of a bamboo pole, held aloft by a group of people below, with the legend, 'We love you.' Those days he was the darling of nearly all the Bengali youth. Then I joined the Brahmacharya Vidyalaya instituted by him—the weak-sighted boy to whom all the schools of Calcutta refused admission found a place in this institution. It was impossible for a student with poor eyesight like me to enter an art school in those days; still I found a place in Kala Bhavana despite my teacher's objections. I have already referred earlier to Nandalal's objections in this regard; he could not imagine I would ever be able to paint. He had said plainly: how can one who hasn't the power of eyesight, paint? So, even if I may not have got anything from Rabindranath, I should say he gave me a new life.

Some of the Rabindranath specialists of Visva-Bharati once asked me, 'We understand that Rabindranath even took classes?' I replied, 'Yes. I have attended his classes. He went through our notebooks—not

only did he correct our spellings in Bengali but where our handwriting was messy he wrote the letters out on the side in his clear hand.' I presume the students of that generation have not preserved those notebooks—perhaps because Rabindranath was still close to them, not removed and distant. He could be seen, dressed in a *lungi* and *panjabi,* on ihe road or hostel or dormitory or library. And one could readily talk to him.

I never had the good fortune of coming very close to Rabindranath. But in a sense, he was never far from the course of my life. One really cannot transfer one's life's excitement to another but Rabindranath did manage to create an environment where one could realize that life was full of excitement and that one could deliver oneself from the darkness of self-distrust and inertia through creative activity. With each change of season he brought us a basket of songs. The memory of the atmosphere that those songs and Nature's glory contrived together is still green in every student's mind.

Dining the rainy season the Santiniketan hostels were soaking wet; the rain beat in through the leaky roofs and broken windows and often drenched our beds. Some of us complained to him about our plight alter having lost much sleep and patience, one such rainy night. In a calm voice he said, 'Sit down. See, water has entered this thatched hut of mine too and I too have not been able to sleep the whole night. So, I sat up and wrote a song. Now listen to it and tell me how it sounds." Saying this he started singing—'(), waker of sorrows! I shall sin^ to you, as you seem to have kept me awake, just for this sake.'[59] Alter finishing his song Rabindranath said, 'Artists and poets, we are in the same boat, no one looks after us.' True, only a little water had entered Rabindranath's room. All the same we returned from his room elated, telling each other, 'Why are we not able to do the same?' I can admit today that Rabindranath did not get the house repaired. I cannot recall if he ever did. But he did manage with his song to make us forget all the woes of that night. One cannot deny that Rabindranath was unable to remove many injustices or redress various grievances of teachers and students. But despite that, what we have received from him is invaluable. Another incident of many years later,

perhaps in 1938 or 1939; I was sketching in the Uttarayan gardens with the boys and girls one morning when I was suddenly summoned by Rabindranath. He had never called me like this, all of a sudden so I went to him a little surprised. He was sitting on the south verandah of Uttarayan, a small table before him. 'What are you all doing there,' he asked. 'Sketching with the boys'. 'You, too, are sketching with them?' 'Yes.' 'Let me see what you have sketched.' He turned the pages of the notebook and started looking at the sketches with special interest. They were sketches of sunflowers. After that he asked me many questions about those sketches. 1 had sketched the construction of the flowers and the special parts, from front, back and various sides. He made me explain why I done so. 'Do the students listen to you? Do they understand all this?' he asked. 'Yes, sir. I try to make them understand as well as I can. I do these separately in their sketch books and explain it to them.' Said Rabindranath, 'You say they understand, but I say they do not, not all of them.' I could not think of how to react to this statement of his. He said, 'Maybe five or six listen to your words with care, two or three try to understand, one or two do understand and try to put them to use. You know, this is your misfortune; what four only will understand you have to explain to fourteen. I never wanted to make Visva-Bharati so big; but others want it so, and what can you do?'

Rabindranath tolerated many things for many reasons. He did not weed out by force the things he did not want, or was unable to. So one can see how his interest in Visva-Bharati decreased with time. And weeds that had taken root in the shadow of this disinterest grew up to be giant trees after his death.

Around 1940, Atul Bose[60] was invited specially to Santiniketan to Daint a portrait of Rabindranath. When I came to hear that the pori ait had been finished, I went to see it. While I was looking at the tainting closely I heard behind me Rabindranath's voice. Turning, I aw him standing behind me. He was coming from his bath—white air, white beard, dressed in a white *jabba,* arms folded behind him, olding a large towel—standing on the red cement floor, bent a little rward. He remarked, 'Look at that, does that painting resemble

me?' Then he passed by my side like a flash of light over the red floor and went out. I looked at the Atul Bose portrait again and had to admit to myself that it had not caught that lively glow that one saw in Rabindranath's face and eyes, even in those days.

When I questioned Atul Bose about this he said, 'What could I do, tell me? When I came and stood before him in the studio I became nervous. Besides, he was very temperamental. When the work had advanced quite a bit, he told me one day—"What are you tinkering with there? Make the background of the painting red and the *jabba* black." 1 said—"You will then have to wear a black *jabba."* Then Rabindranath said with some irritation—"You are an artist, can't you paint a black *jabba* from your mind?" As soon as so much black came in, the scheme of lighting in the painting underwent a change. What could 1 do? I have painted many portraits but never got into such a fix.' 1 could pick up enough courage to ask Atul Bose such a personal question only because I knew him rather well. No one else would have given me such a candid answer. Atul Bose was a genuinely open-hearted person; he never hesitated to talk about his work's strengths and weaknesses.

Rabindranath passed away in 1941. After his death Rathindranath took over the reins of the Visva-Bharati. After Rabindranath's death one can notice the spread of a kind of conservatism in Visva-Bharati. Although he was left to himself, Nandalal too steered Kala Bhavana towards conservatism after Rabindranath's death. Within this conservative atmosphere I married one of my students. I was then nearly forty years old.

When you mention marriage it naturally calls up the vision of a marriage feast. My Chinese professor friend, Wu,[61] and his wife arranged one in the Chinese style. Professor Wu was then researching Indian drama and stage craft in China Bhavana and Mrs Wu was learning Bengali. The Professor was an excellent cook. I discovered during that dinner that he was extraordinarily skilled in the art of cooking, and he did everything himself. The dishes were not many, true; if he had to grind the spices and fry the spices like the Bengalis he could not have

done the cooking all by himself. In Chinese cooking some things are cooked in water, others in steam, though roasts and tries are not unknown. One special feature of such cooking is that the natural colour of the vegetable or fish remains almost intact. So on the dining table there was plenty of variety in colour. In rare cases turmeric is used. Various kinds of sauces, salty, sweet, were sprinkled on almost all the dishes. Professor Wu had prepared all kinds of dishes for this party; his wife said that he had worked hard for two days to get them ready. All over the world people are now willing to give culinary skills the status of art; hence this little digression introducing Chinese cooking.

Professor Wu helped me a great deal in understanding Chinese aesthetics. He read and translated for me various passages from Chinese books. I came to know from him, for the first time, some of the root principles of Chinese poetics, which Taoist and Confucian scholars had extensively discussed and expounded. I refer to some here. To explain the depth of aesthetic experience *(ras)* the aesthetician says, 'Like a stone thrown into a well creates a kind of sound in the water, then sinks to the bottom and disappears, an effective poem sets off a resonance of words loaded with meaning and disappears in the world of aesthetic experience *(ras).'* Of tragedy he says, 'An aged warrior is de-rusting his sword.' Of ineffectual aesthetic statement he says, 'Mountain, moon in the sky, flowing river, flowering tree, young man playing the flute beneath—these beautiful things can together create non-beauty. Or like a pearl in a bowl of water does not fall out of it but gets into a soft animation within it, a good poem is at the same time, lively and contained.' While discussing these Mrs Wu cited many examples from Chinese literature and how their meaning differed in the eyes of the Taoists and the Confucians. I always found the Taoist interpretation more to my liking.

Mrs Wu had studied literature at Peking University. But she found it hard to understand Rabindranath's poems. Firstly, she found them too long; secondly, she could not stomach their philosophical content. At this time, when I was discussing Chinese aesthetics with Professor Wu, the famous Chinese artist Ju Peon, was staying as a guest at China Bhavana. He learned painting in Paris for seven years and was,

besides, skilled in the methods of Chinese traditional painting. An extremely busy person, I could get a chance to talk to him only once. When I opened the topic of Chinese aesthetic treatises he got agitated, kicked forward his shoe-shod foot and exclaimed, 'These treatises have ruined China. Kick them out! Groups of artists sit at home and turn the pages of these treatises to see which side of a tree, according to its rules should have two branches and which side one; they study the rules, they do not look outside!' If I had not seen the State Exhibition at Shanghai I would have considered this reaction of Ju Peon exaggerated. True, Ju Peon had a great respect for the Tang tradition and used to say, 'I want to resurrect the ethos of the Tang era; this is why I am working so hard.' Though I cannot understand to this day how a Paris-educated oil painter like Ju Peon could re-establish Tang traditions in today's world.

Now I came to a time when I was finding the atmosphere of Kala Bhavana somewhat distressing. My main grievance was that I was not getting an opportunity to put my hand to any large work. One day Ramkinkar said, 'Come on, let us take on a really large work.' The walls of Hindi Bhavana were empty; there was no problem in securing permission from its Adhyaksha, Hazariprasad[62] but there was in getting Nandalal's consent. When I broached the topic of Hindi Bhavana lo him he replied stiffly, 'No, not there.' This was the first time that he had stood in my way. And the first time I defied his word.

I started work on Hindi Bhavana soon after. I could not have, perhaps, done so without the sympathy and help of Surendranath Kar,[63] my old teacher. He requisitioned bamboos and tin sheets from the school and got the scaffolding made in a very short time. I went to see the scaffolding; it was handsomely built against all the four walls with a railing of thick bamboos behind, to avoid the risk of falling off. My assistant J itendrakumar[64] climbed the ladder, walked on all sides and declared, 'Quite strongly made, you can come up safely.' When I went tip the ladder and nearly got on the scaffolding, the ladder slipped. My wife,[65] standing below, quickly caught me and saved me from any major injury. With such a set-back at the start itself I declared, 'Let us begin the work tomorrow.'

My assistants de-plastered the wall and kept it wet and I went around to collect sand and lime. Curds were needed while slaking lime, it was arranged for from the kitchen. Stone lime came, it was broken down after sprinkling water, then cleared of stones and pieces of dead lime and slaked in two large earthenware pans, then the curds were added. After this came the soaking of the wall. This work was lengthy and strenuous. For a few days I worked like a mason. Mixing the plaster followed this. Every morning I supervised the work of the boys and girls of Kala Bhavana till nine o'clock; then came to Hindi Bhavana. And the plastering started. The work started from the left-hand corner of the southern wall. After covering a few feet it became clear that the existing painting on the eastern wall by Kripal Singh,[66] a student of Kala Bhavana, would look rather incongruous. After some thought I tried to make a relief frieze on its sides and integrate it in a total decorative scheme. The reliefs were done by Jitendrakumar and Leela. The work was done as planned but the painting on the eastern wall could not be quite integrated.

Whatever it may be, when the south wall was half-way through Jitendra and Leela had to leave Santiniketan. Leela went to Karachi to her mother; Jitendra went to Najibabad. In their place came Subramanyan[67] and Devakinandan.[68] When I worked on the wet plaster my assistants had hardly anything to do; their job was to wet the wall, lay the plaster, reach the colours to me; the task, in fact, of a menial. To do this day after day was not easy for any trained artist. It was also natural for them to want to do some work on their own. But the patience of these two assistants of mine was endless. And their patience was under trial when, after a whole day's labour, I would come the next morning and ask them to scrape off the previous day's work and lay plaster afresh. Without a question Mani or Devaki would get on the scaffolding and start scraping the wall. During the whole year I never saw them irritated even once. Devaki's patience had another side to it. He fell off the scaffolding one day; as the folds of his dhoti got caught on the spike of a bamboo he fell in stages, hanging down. No sound escaped his lips and I asked, 'Mani, has Devaki passed out?' 'Nothing has happened,' said Devaki, 'only the clothes

are torn' and he got back on the scaffolding and resumed his work. When I was working on the west wall Devakinandan also left; Mani and I were left. I do not quite remember whether my assistants worked on any part of the mural, but I think on the horses Subramanyan's hand is substantially there. The work ended; only the signature was left. I went around the scaffolding to see whether there was anything left to be done or any portion to be redone, when a part of a tin sheet gave in and my leg went through. Mani was on the scaffolding, he checked it up and said, 'Many parts of the tin sheets are undependable, it is better not to stand on them and work any more.' I got down without putting the signature. I however said, 'I feel like seeing how the work looks when the scaffolding is taken down.' 'Let us do it now,' said Mani, and brought the scaffolding down in no time. I could not see the mural well from below, Mani went round and saw and declared, 'There is nothing more to be done. Come, let us have some tea.'

As soon as the Hindi Bhavana work ended my wheel of fortune also took a new turn. I decided to spend some time outside Santiniketan and wrote to Narendramani Acharya, a friend of my brother, asking whether he could get me a permit to enter Nepal. He was then the Foreign Minister to the Nepal Government. In reply to this I got a letter from the Education Minister of Nepal saying that the Education Department would like to offer me a curator's job; the terms of service were mentioned in the letter. I communicated acceptance to the Education Minister and presented a letter of resignation to the Adhyaksha of Kala Bhavana. When I tendered my resignation Leela was working in Meerut. Hearing of it, she came to Santiniketan. And went back after going through the terms of the Nepal job. One evening I too left for Nepal, leaving my worldly belongings with two friends and snapping my sentimental ties with Santiniketan.

Nowadays you can fly to Nepal from any part of India. But I went by the difficult mountainous road. My sketchbooks probably have some record of this road. Now that my memory is hazy I cannot describe it at length. What comes readily to mind is the astounding majesty of the

Himalayas. Travelling on this road one constantly felt how small, insignificant and helpless man is, however bloate"d"he may be with his ego. The memory of my past was also blurring away under the impact of the road. Carrying me in a basket-chair on their shoulders, the coolies started in the morning and reached me by evening to the government guest house at Chisagadi. Starting off next morning, after eating fish and rice at the coolie camp, they came and paused before the Chandragiri Mountain. Then crossing the Chandragiri Mountain we reached Thankhot towards evening. At Thankhot they put down the basket-chair on the level ground and shouted in chorus *Jay Pashupatinath.'*

Thankhot was the gateway to Kathmandu. Two employees of the Museum were there, waiting. They took charge of the baggage and took me by bus to Kathmandu town. When the bus reached and stopped before a three-storeyed building the streetlights were already burning. The *Subba*[69] of the Museum was waiting for me. He helped me down from the bus with care and said, 'This three-storeyed house is your residence, please go up. We will look to the baggage.' That night's meal came from the *Subba's* house; meat, varieties of vegetables and a plateful of clean thin, dry beaten rice. The *Subba* left that night after arranging two bearers for me. The bearers were smart; at the slightest movement they asked, 'Any service, sir?' My body was aching after sitting long hours in the basket-chair. So when I went to bed, I fell asleep readily.

While I was taking tea next morning I saw through the open door a shortish gentleman in ash-grey Nepali dress, who looked at me and asked in perfect Bengali, 'May I come in?' I said, 'Certainly, do come in.' He started off the conversation by saying, '1 came to know last night from *Subba* that you have arrived, so I came to see you.' I asked, 'Where did you learn such spotless Bengali?' 'After all I studied at the Calcutta Art School. That is why I am so happy to meet you. My name is Chandraman Maske.[70] Here most people refer to me as Master Saheb.' Maske was a master at making conversation. I saw he had no objection to taking tea. He sipped the tea and remarked, 'Excellent tea.' Chandraman had an extraordinary talent for hopping from topic to topic; without giving me a chance to put in a word, he went on,

'Bagbazar's *rasagolla,* Dilkush cabin's meat, Girish's chop, Bhim Nag's *sandesh*'[11] . . . , saying now and again, 'Calcutta's eats and sweets are excellent; you cannot get any such here.' I asked him, 'How long ago did you leave Calcutta?' 'Ten years. I have not been to Calcutta since. I cannot talk Bengali to anyone here. So I am happy to see you.' I wished he would stop but he had endless conversation. He continued, i have taken tea at your place, now please come to our house once. I shall consider myself fortunate if you take me for a friend.' 'I shall surely go to your house,' I said, 'I myself am lucky to find, so soon after arriving, an artist friend like you.' Maske stood up and said, 'I take your leave today. I take on myself the responsibility of showing you around Kathmandu town but do keep in mind that you have to pay a visit to our house.' Then Chandraman Maske left.

I had still not been round the house. So, with the bearers, I started room by room. The second floor too had a long empty hall like the first, A small cabin to the side; the kitchen, with a big platform below the roof to store fire wood. In one corner of the small landing on the ground floor was the lavatory, as tiny as it was dark. On the opposite side a tumble-down well, its mouth closed up with stone and lime plaster. The hall on the ground floor was under lock and key; the landlord stayed in Patan. The house had been rented by the government for the new Museum Curator. I heard from the bearers that this house was known to be haunted so it never had tenants. The Museum's *Subba* came in the meantime. I asked him to sit down but he would not; he did all the talking standing. I heard from him that the Dasara holidays were on and the museum was closed, so the house had not yet been properly furnished. The Education Minister had been informed of my arrival; I had an appointment with him the following afternoon. While leaving, the *Subba* said, 'If you need anything do send word to me through the bearers.' Meanwhile the two bearers had, together, dusted and wiped my boxes and lined them along the wall. I was pleased to see their industry. I opened one of the boxes and took out and arranged paper, colours and brushes on the table.

The broad Yuddha Sadak was almost devoid of people; it had a silent, deserted air. I asked the bearers why there was nobody on the road. I was told this was the gambling season and holiday time for the

government offices. So the traffic on the roads had decreased. In the late evening my old acquaintance, Narendramani, called along with a Bengali gentleman in western dress, named Sudhir Ray Chaudhuri—Professor of Bengali at Trichandra College for long years. Narendramani wore Nepali dress, and a black cap which carried in front a golden insignia, indicating his official status. Amongst other things, Narendramani mentioned with a smile, 'Do you know, your appointment is not confirmed yet?' 'How's that', I said, 'I came here after getting an appointment order!' Narendramani and Sudhir Ray said together, 'No, the appointment is still unconfirmed. First you have to meet the Education Minister but he too cannot confirm it; only the Maharaja will take the ultimate decision with regard to it.' .When both got up to go I said, 'I hope I will not get into difficulties with this job, finally.' Sudhir Ray said, 'Don't worry, this is the normal procedure in the Nepal Government, or what is called *a formality.'*

The next afternoon the *Subba* reached me to Babar Mahal. The Education Minister, Mrigendra Shamsher, was very handsome and extremely civilized in conversation. I did not notice in him the swagger of a highly placed Rana. Mrigendra Shamsher told me, 'There are seven days more of holidays, so take it easy. You will have to have one audience with Maharajah, it is he who will lawfully appoint you. But then this is just a formality of this place. For anything you need in the meantime ask the *Subba,* the furniture will take a little more time to arrange. I won't keep you long today. We shall however be meeting each other often. Relax.' I came out of Mrigendra Shamsher's room glad at heart.

During the seven days of holidays I wandered about the town with the bearers. There was gambling going on, on both sides of the streets. Everywhere there were stupas of various shapes and sizes which people went round and round. Chandraman took me off the hands of the bearers and said, 'Come, let me show you around.' Chandraman talked fast and walked slow. He knew everyone in Kathmandu town. People stopped when they saw him and he forgot I was with him, and went on talking continuously at his usual speed. I could not follow the Newari language but I could guess what they were talking about. But

1 should admit that Chandraman knew his Kathmandu well—which temple had good wood sculpture, which had metal icons, where the *prasad* was good; these were at his fingertips. One could sketch here standing on the road side, people did not act curious. If any youngster edged up to me to see what I was doing the grownups said, 'Artist. Come away from there.'

My days passed well; I did some sketching outdoors then sat at home and made drawings of Nepali life from memory. Chandraman came and sat at my place and went through these drawings, saying appreciatively, 'They are excellent, *mashai*—one can clearly make out which spot you depict.' Chandraman inserted the word *mashai* at random in the body of his conversation.

1 had my audience with the Maharajah, my appointment was confirmed and the holidays ended. I went to see the Museum, eight or ten days after I arrived in Kathmandu—it was quite far from where I stayed. The Museum was called the Armory—its main collection was weapons, heads of wild buffaloes, tigers, etc. Whatever collection there was of paintings and sculpture was neither properly displayed nor labelled. It was like a big godown. The previous curator had got some showcases made; they were not quite functional though he had spent a lot of money. The staff, comprising gallery keepers and numerous daily labourers *ipipa),* was not small. Coolies cleaned the statues in town, tended the gardens, swept the Museum. The gallery-keepers were meant to show round the visitors but there were so few visitors that they had no work. On the top of all of them was the *Subba;* he was the supervisor.

I arrived in Nepal at the time of the Puja. When winter set in my wife and an old student of Kala Bhavana came and joined me. After this a few other artists too came and went. This is to say that my home came alive with the onset of winter. Nepali life had many novel features. There were many things to see. But despite these, people used to modern life could not feel happy there for a long time. Because, in those days, Kathmandu town did not have cinema halls, restaurants or coffee houses, nor were there any libraries or newspapers; apart from *Gorkha Patra* no paper was available, whether in English or any Indian

language. So we got together and decided to learn a little of Nepali craftsmanship.

I had in between got acquainted with an eminent Nepalese artisan of that time, Kulasundar Shilakarmi. He did all kinds of jobs for the government and the wood carving of the Talaju temple, the family shrine of the Ranas, was done under his supervision. Whatever wood sculptures Sylvain Levi had taken out of Nepal were all made by him. His kind of disregard for worldly riches and impartiality in dealing with the rich and the poor, as I marked, is rarely met with in today's world. Also his extraordinary sense of self-esteem. I made efforts to take him to the Museum many times but he always waved it off saying, 'Why should I go to any place to see the handiwork of artisans after buying a ticket?' So I gave him the right to enter the Museum without a ticket. Then he said, 'There are many other artisans here too; if you give the same right to all of them, I shall go.'

One morning I went to see Kulasundar in his workshop and said, 'My wife and this student of mine want to learn wood and stone carving from you.' On the road outside Kulasundar's home some women were polishing stone after sprinkling water; other craftsmen were doing little odd jobs. Kulasundar looked up his almanac and said, 'All right, I will teach them. But they will have to work on this road, sitting on a mat.' I said, 'Whichever way you decide.' When I brought up the topic of remuneration he smiled and said, 'The lessons haven't started yet. Let them learn, then we shall talk about remuneration. You can start from tomorrow.' But under the excuse of ill auspices he turned my wife and the others back the next day. I went again and Kulasundar said the work would start the following day. He took them on that day. True, he did not make them sit on the street; he gave them a place to work on the first floor. He told them, 'I tried to find out whether you were really keen to work.'

The work started with the figure of Bhimsen, holding a club. Bhimsen is the chief deity of Nepali tradesmen. His status is a lot like that of Ganapathi amongst us. Statues of Bhimsen were consigned to the rivers; so they were in great demand.

Now I should say a word or two about Kulasundar's teaching method. According to the iconic canon Bhimsen's icon should have

wide-open eyes. But his disciples had by mistake carved Bhimsen with down-cast eyes. The other artisans declared, 'Such icons are inauspicious.' But Kulasundar remarked, 'Let that be. Visvakarma will be happy enough if both eyes are alike; if that is so all is well.' When the students were working Kulasundar turned his back to them and sat smoking, saying from time to time, 'It is not all right, the tool is slipping.' One of the students said his hand was aching and so the tool was shaky. Kulasundar observed, 'It is not the hand but the heart that is shaky. Let your heart take hold, then your hand will follow suit.' I heard that he showed these students one day the pass I had issued him and declared with pride, that the boss himself had come and given him the pass, but he had still not deigned to go.

There were many accomplished artisans in Nepal at that time but 1 never saw amongst any of them his kind of individuality. He completely changed my views about medieval artisans. Though a traditional artisan, Kulasundar had the courage to override the canon. My revered friend Nitaibinod Goswami wanted a statue of Buddha with his Sakti, which was quite uncanonical. When Kulasundar heard that this demand came from a learned scholar of Buddhism he agreed to make it. His son and other assistants were upset when they heard that such an uncanonical work was to be made in their workshop but Kulasundar said, 'When someone has conceived of such an image it is an artisan's job to make it worthy of worship.' I did not come across such a liberal outlook amongst the artisan-painters of that time or the bronze-founders of Patan.

Though I had ample occasion to mix with artisans and ordinary men of Nepal I did not, in comparison, have much occasion to mix with the Ranas; nor did I make any special effort in that direction. I was in touch with Mrigendra Shamsher, the Education Minister and had on my initiative got introduced to Kaiser Shamsher, then Governor of Nepal. At our first meeting I had sought his permission to use his library. He gave the permission gladly and gave me an appointment. 'I shall show you the library myself,' he said, 'my library has many Bengali books too.'

After a day or two I called at his *darbar* at the appointed time. And saw Kaiser Shamsher standing in his portico, leather boots on feet,

Nepali blanket on shoulders and two pieces of paper in his hand. When 1 greeted him formally and reminded him about seeing the library, he flew into a temper and said, 'What do you think, 1 am at your beck and call? That 1 will do whatever you order?' Kaiser Shamsher stamped and roared without letting up even a little—'See that fellow! He has come asking me for my bicycle; my father gave it to me as a present, how can I give it to him? And why do people come to borrow money from me? Am 1 a moneylender? No, tell him it is impossible.' Then in an instant his voice changed; he said in a calm voice, 'Come with me.'

1 followed him through the drawing room to the room upstairs. 1 never imagined I would see such a big library in Kathmandu town. It had all the Bengali classics—Rabindranath, Bankim Chandra and many other titles. Kaiser explained to me which almirah had what books. He faced one and said, 'You will probably find here almost all the publications there are on Nepal.' Then he asked the librarian to open the almirah. He brought out two fairly fat, bound volumes of typescript and said, 'A word-to-word translation of Levi's book on Nepal. 1 had it sent down from the Paris Academy, take them and, later, any others you need.' He entered the name and number of the book in the register in his own hand. Handing me the books he said, 'Don't give these to anyone else.'

The year passed. The two who came with me went back home; in their place Riten Mozumdar[72] came after finishing his Diploma in Santiniketan. 1 came again upon the cycle of festivals. I had to call at Kaiser's durbar in connection with one of these. 1 had taken with me a small water-colour painting to give him as a present. He took the painting in his hands and asked, 'Who did this? Good drawing.' Then put the painting under the glass on his table and told me, 'I have a small collection of paintings; you can see them if you like.' I said, 'At present I have my wife and a young student with me; they paint and learn carving from a local artisan, we shall be grateful if you allow them too.'

In Kaiser's collection there were a number of paintings by Abanindranath, Nandalal, Kshitindranath[7:>'] and plenty of examples

from Rajput and Mughal traditions. I also saw three large landscapes by Rabindranath. We passed from one room to another; Kaiser did not pause anywhere; in the end he came to one where he stopped and said, 'Look this is Laura Knight's[74] portrait of my wife.' Saying that and without giving us a chance to see the Laura Knight painting well, he turned around and said, 'And here is the original,' and instantly passed through another door. A beautiful young lady, with a look of perplexity on her face, waving us away. We could not even wish her. We got through the open door to see Kaiser Shamsher standing with his back to the wall.

Kaiser continued showing us the collection. For the first time I saw in one lot all kinds of examples of Nepali art of the Gorkha period. He had an expert's knowledge of these. He had only made one mistake, he had put a painted, unbaked clay plaque along with the terracol la plaques. Since I noticed the difference I said, 'If you allow me I can prove it.' A scratch with a knife on the back uncovered unburnt clay. Kaiser said, 'Thank you, I stand corrected.'

I think we spent over three hours that day in Kaiser Mahal. Our only regret was that we could not see the Laura Knight painting well, nor have a good look at the Rani Saheba although we passed in front of her.

In the evenings Sudhir Roy often paid us a visit after his game of tennis. Placing his cap and stick on the table carefully, he usually asked, 'Where did you go today? What did you see?' That day we talked about our Kaiser Mahal experience for quite a while. In the end I asked him, 'Can you tell me how such an informed person like Kaiser could not see the difference between a work in unburnt clay and terracotta?' Sudhir Ray smiled a little and said, 'You may be wrong there; he is quite alert on these matters. By posing the question he was just figuring out the reach of the curator's knowledge and discernment.' 'Is that so?' I exclaimed. He said, 'Yes, Kaiser has done this kind of thing many times. Once while strolling in his garden he put on a look of ignorance and asked a new lecturer of Trichandra College many questions about it and in the end proved that this lecturer knew nothing, with the help of standard books. You probably do not know that

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Kaiser's knowledge of botany is as good any specialist's. There are many such stories; but time is up for today, we shall do it another day.' Saying that he stood up, picked up his cap and stick, and walked out.

Sudhir Ray came or went, sat or left, by the watch. One could easily see that he attached great value to the ideals of the Swadeshi age, although I could never find out whether he was closely involved with the Swadeshi Movement in Bengal. He could take a stiff stand on matters of self-respect; he often used to say, 'I will never bend my backbone to pick a few coins from between the feet of the bosses. I detest those who do this. I visit you and sit talking with you because I haven't noticed this in you.' Kularatnam,[75] who had studied under Sudhir Ray, used to say, 'It is hard to come across such a principled man amongst the Indians.'

I was about three years in Nepal. I cannot really give an account, with time and date, of all that happened during these three years. But I shall recount some episodes. The Museum had been rearranged in the mean time. I also learned how to talk to and bargain with those traders who went outside the State with paintings, sculptures, etc. in early winter. They treated me with deference as they had to take a permit from me before they could take these outside. There was smuggling too on the side; the government had given me a list of seven or eight smugglers, though I never set eyes on them. The permit carried a list of the goods the traders wanted to take out; it was the Curator's job to check these and stop the outflow of things fit to be kept in the Museum. Traders resented this restriction so when they presented their passports to the Curator they also put some money on it—in plain words, a bribe. I stopped this practice. This made most of the traders happy. In this connection, I recall a particular incident. One day a trader came to me bringing with him a handsome middle-aged woman. The *Subba* also came. He said, 'This woman will haggle with you—they are the pleaders for the traders.' The woman's talk and behaviour was something to remember. One moment she spoke smiling, at another she pointed to the poverty and misery of the artisans and begged for compassion, saying that if their goods were stopped it

would cause them immense loss, etc. Whenever I reserved anything for the museum these women appeared. They mainly sold liquor for a living, but working as a go-between for the traders was another aspect of their profession.

To make the Museum more popular I arranged an exhibition. Representatives of the various darbars came to the exhibition, including Mrigendra Shamsher and Kaiser Shamsher. But not the students or teachers from the schools and colleges, or the artisans. Searching for a reason I realized that neither the educated Nepali nor the artisan community had given any thought to the need for establishing a relationship between the past and the present. Similar problems had arisen in western countries too at one time or another. But Nepal was completely under the influence of religious teachers like Manjusri, Nemuni, Lord Buddha still; even after 1950, there were many people in Nepal who had not seen a train, ship, aeroplane or cinema, though radios had made their appearance in Nepali shops by then.

One day Kularatnam came and informed us that the Maharajah had given permission for the opening of a cinema; the hall was already under construction. He had passed a royal order that it should be ready in two months. Whoever held such a royal order could commandeer anyone or anything from government offices for the work. In plain words, Kularatnam was for two months the virtual representative of the Maharajah; he said jokingly, 'Do you know I can take you off the Museum and put you to the work of decorating the cinema? And you will not be able to do anything.'

The wonder-worker Kularatnam got the cinema hall up in two months. He also prophesied that under the influence of this cinema hall the pattern of our lives would totally change. One day loudspeakers started blaring behind our house and in the evening ticket sales began. Till then no five persons could gather on the road after sunset according to law. But no sooner had the ticket sales started than rows of people gathered before the cinema hall. Rani Sahebas of the darbars and high-placed Gorkhas came to the cinema. Later I heard one day that the Maharajah himself was coming to see the cinema. Bush shirts appeared among the college-going boys and many of

them gave up caps. Nepal had stepped into the scientific age After that, reports of a student movement came to my ears and one day a group of people were arrested for conspiring to assassinate the Maharajah.

According to the legend Gokarna was the capital of the Kiratas; this was marked by a cow's ears on a stone slab. It was here that Nepal's first aerodrome was built. Then, one day, an aeroplane landed on Nepal's soil to the great marvel of all Nepalis. Many pious Nepalis did not want to believe that anyone could come flying over the head of Pasupathinath; but when the aeroplane did land everyone went and saluted it saying, 'All by the grace of Svyambhunath!' The worshippers of Shiva said it exemplified Svayambhunath's power. But the inhabitants of Nepal had not yet woken up to the fact that the impact of the scientific age had already started to transform them.

The Museum stood far away from the town; it was a haven of eternal peace. But here too there was breach of peace. The old *Subba* went away on transfer to another department. A new *Subba* joined; he had expensive clothes on his body, shiny shoes on his feet and a tongue as sharp as a trowel. He was hardly to be seen around, and was extremely rude. If I told him anything he snapped back, 'Is it not enough that your work gets done?' I had in the end to report the matter to Mrigendra Shamsher.

One day Mrigendra Shamsher came to the Museum at two o'clock, alone. The *Subba* went and stood in front of the car window and whispered something in his ear, then withdrew three paces and stood at attention. Mrigendra Shamsher opened the door of the car and said, 'Come inside, let me reach you home. You must be tired, I shall drop you home and then go to the Mahal.' I got into the car. Mrigendra Shamsher closed the door and started the car. When he was on the road he told me, 'Do you know what the *Subba* whispered into my ears? He let me know that he was No. 7 spy of my father, Babar Shamsher, and that he had to go round to many places. He himself never knows when he will come to the Museum or how long he will stay. And I may as well explain to you what this means—if he

so wishes this fellow can harm even a person like me; it will be harder still for you to function.' After that he added, 'Now I have something personal to tell you. You know by now quite a bit about the state of affairs in Nepal. I request you not to give it any publicity in your country in the near future.' I replied, 'How could.you think of such a possibility? I hardly go anywhere. I have not hobnobbed with any Bengalis, except Sudhir Ray. And I never visit the darbar unless I have work there; what makes you think I know the whole story?' Mrigendra Shamsher said, 'I know you do not go anywhere. But you have some Newari friends who visit you regularly. What happens in the darbar is probably of no interest to you and you know nothing about it. But you are likely to know what is happening in town, the kind of tension that is growing between the Ranas and the Newaris. Kularatnam and Chandraman must have talked about these matters to you. So I am making this friendly request—not to write about all this for some time, when you go back to your country.'

The car stopped before our house. While opening the door Mrigendra Shamsher repeated, 'Promise me, as a friend, not to publish anything on the present situation in Nepal. Will you honour this request of mine?' I said, 'I give you my gentleman's word, I will not give it publicity. Please do not worry on that account.' Then with what we call a warm handshake I got down from Mrigendra Shamsher's car. And Mrigendra Shamsher drove off towards Babar Mahal.*

After coming to Kathmandu, my days passed quite happily, seeing temples, monasteries or displays of painting and statuary in shrine after shrine during the Shravan festival. It was never monotonous. I enjoyed seeing gaily dressed Newari women, wearing floral ornaments, making rounds of the temples in groups, carrying baskets of flowers. The peal of temple bells, right from dawn, was beautiful to hear. But while seeing these rare sights I was also sinking into a medieval world. I started worrying from time to time, whether I too would not turn, like them, into a weed-bound pool of stagnant water.

* Now, there is a total change in Nepal's history. Mrigendra Shamsher too is no more. So I do not have to keep the promise; all this is a thing of the past.

Hillsmen can go on foot mile upon mile without thinking of a vehicle but we cannot escape doing so.

I received the news of the birth of our daughter. Mrigendra Shamsher's remark that I may face greater difficulties in fulfilling my responsibilities also kept rolling in my mind. At long last, I decided to give up the Nepal job. Like I had to have an audience with the Maharajah to get the appointment, I had to have another to relinquish it. 'Get well and come back,' he said. My friends told me, 'Good for you! When the Maharajah has given you leave it means you can come back anytime.' I started packing. I gave away our kitchen things to our young maid, Mohan Devi, but she protested, 'I don't want them, babu! Please don't go!'

On the eve of our departure from Kathmandu a grand farewell dinner was arranged. Sudhir-babu called that evening to say, 'I shall not be coming in the morning to see you off. Now that we have come to know each other, drop a line now and then.' Then he picked his cap and stick as usual and went towards the staircase, then stopped, turned his head round and said, '1 used to enjoy coming here. All right, 1 take your leave.' Kularatnam observed, 'Mastermashai gave vent this time to a little sentiment.'

Riten, Ghandraman, Kularatnam and I sat with hot roast duck on the plate before us. After a bite or two Chandraman said appreciatively, 'It is delicious. I am eating roast duck after a long time.' Just then Mohan Devi entered and announced that someone from the darbar had come. At this odd hour? When I got up and went out I saw it was Mrigendra Shamsher's bodyguard. I knew him well, as he often brought me fish or birdmeat from Mrigendra Shamsher's home. 'What is the matter?' I asked. He told me in brief that he had come with a royal warrant to arrest Ghandraman. The warrant said that Chandraman Maske was to be picked up wherever he was, in whatever condition, and house-interned that night. Knowing Chandraman was here, he had come to take him. By the word of the law he could not wait a second but I impressed upon him that I had invited Ghandraman to dinner and he should be allowed to finish his meal. The man finally agreed.

When he heard of the warrant Ghandraman's face went so livid,

something I had never seen before. Kularatnam look Chandraman by the arm and took him to the bathroom. Both returned in a short while. Chandraman did not wait, he walked straight away. Kularatnam said, 'Good-hearted man, but a fool. Should such simple souls get involved with things of this kind?' like he was talking to himself. 'What has happened?' I asked. I was told that one of those people who had plotted to murder the Maharajah was found in Chandraman Maske's house and the police also discovered some hand-grenades. Kularatnam started to eat his roast duck, as if he was not upset, and went on muttering, 'Chandraman has done this kind of thing before; and has been caught andjailed. But at that time, he did not have to suffer very much injail, he was a special favourite of Shamsher. While in jail, he even got a temple built. Everything about him is fine but he does not know how to organize a group.' After finishing eating Kularatnam remarked, 'It will have been nicer if Chandraman was still with us.'

Kularatnam brought a taxi at the appointed time next morning. The baggage had been dispatched the previous day. When I came to Kathmandu I came by night under the cover of darkness so I had hardly seen anything of the roadside. Today, I was going away in the light of dawn, enjoying the scenery. On the way was an ancient site, Nag Sarovar, surrounded by thick jungle—Kularatnam stopped the taxi and pointed out, 'Look, there lies Nag Sarovar.' It seemed to me like a shimmer of light way down in the darkness. Riten said, 'The place is so dark and deep as to frighten you.' Going a little further we reached Thankot. No trace of sentiment in engineer Kularatnam, he promptly arranged the coolies and basket-chairs and said, 'There you are. I shall return now. There is a lot of work waiting in the office.'

The same old road. The only difference was that I saw it once in the light of the evening; now I was seeing it in the light of the morning.

Alter returning to India my first thought was, 'Where shall I go? What shall I do?' To begin with, my wife and I and our newborn daughter went to Vanasthali Vidyapith in Rajasthan, with which I had old connections and where I could stay for an indefinite period. But with a family you cannot sit still in the face of an indefinite future. So we

two, husband and wife, decided to go to Mussoorie and set up a small educational centre. We also found a house there, on the Cart Road, suitable for this purpose.

Leela started a nursery school and I started an art training centre where teachers could come in summer and get introduced to modern teaching methods. We found a few students, but we also found that this was not enough to provide us a living. So Leela was obliged in the end to take a job at Welham's Preparatory School in Dehra Dun. There my daughter's education also could be taken care of. So she left for Dehra Dun. I stuck on in Mussoorie for a while, living partly on what little means I had and partly on my wife's earnings.

It was here that 1 started painting clouds for the first time. On the hills the rains are, on the one hand, tiresome but, on the other, astonishingly rewarding. Black clouds everywhere; you cannot tell when the sun rises or sets; an all-enveloping grey. But from amidst this grey the side of a mountain, or a house-window, or a walking man suddenly shimmers forth in the sunlight. The road is invisible and you feel they are walking in a void. One such fantastic scene dissolves and another takes over. The scenery was beautiful and there was ample time for work but the earnings were hardly enough.

When my belt started to hang loose on my waist, I received an unexpected invitation from the Education Department of the State Government at Patna. I already knew jagadishchandra Mathur, the Secretary of the Education Department. He was asking me to take the responsibility of reorganizing the art institution in Bihar. He offered me this government job without an interview, knowing full well that my age and weak eyesight would have debarred me from one. Although Mussoorie's scenery was beautiful, the climate was bracing and I had plenty of time for work—all advantages to an artist—empty pockets was a great disadvantage. So I accepted the government job in Patna.

I joined this job on a three-year contract. The Education Department offered all kinds of assistance to make me feel easy and comfortable. But 1 should admit I was unable to make any changes in the art educational system. Nor did I find Bihar's environment inspiring.

The place where the Art School stood was called Bandar agicha.[76] Here a small lime-washed building housed the painting, culpture and commercial art sections, and the students, though a landful, worked with interest. The Principal lectured them on Perspective' once every month; in his view, if one did not learn Perspective' well one could not advance in art training. The Principal, Radhamohan, was really an advocate. He had even practised law for a while. From what I came to hear, he had had proper training in Hindusthani music and sang regularly. He had established this school on his own initiative to promote the fine arts and later handed it over to the government. Yadu Bandopadhyay, the modelling teacher, was his right-hand man. In his early years he had been a versatile circus i artiste, noted for weight-lifting. He had taken a year's training in the [Calcutta Art School and then joined this institution. The teacher of painting was a student of Bireswar Sen of the Lucknow Art School and the Commercial Art teacher, N ripen Bose, had studied under Atul Bose in the Calcutta Art School. There was another person, who had been trained in this school itself. About sixty per cent of the students of this school were married and some had sons and daughters; so traight from the first year they were exercised about their livelihood. erefore they moved closer to the teacher of commercial art, for he as the only one who had received proper art training and was always ready to be of help to them.

A syllabus was drawn up but the Principal of the school raised objections. In his opinion Model Drawing, Cast Drawing and so on should start from the first year and students should not use more than two colours. Only in the final year should the students do Original Painting. Two of the teachers supported the Principal; one remained silent. The teacher of the Commercial Art section said they might as well give the new syllabus a trial. Original Paintings could start in the first year itself; this part of the new syllabus was acceptable to him.

Painted white though the outside of the Art School was, its inside was burdened with darkness, which the Principal was determined to preserve. It did not take me much effort to explain the state of the Art School to the Education Minister. But he said, 'For the present you could start a separate 'amateur' class for all those who have an urge to

do original painting.' His view was that once this was started the students and teachers would watch the work done and then a step by step effort could be made to change the set-up and functioning of the school.

But after studying the circumstances I realized no such change was possible in this school, as the chairman of its Governing Body was an influential Minister, and Principal Radhamohan was his special favourite. So nothing could be done against the Principal's wishes. Even the Education Minister had no power to interfere with the Art School, leave alone the Education Secretary, who was just a common individual. He had hoped that some change could be initiated through me, but when he realized nothing was possible, this amateur class was envisaged as the last resort. I ran the class in the mornings and the evenings. Some boys and girls came, some dropped out. In about six months an exhibition of this class's work was arranged and this was reviewed in the press.

Maybe I could have effected some change in the Art School if I had been a little more optimistic. But unfortunately I was not then in a suitable frame of mind; from the time I arrived in Patna the condition of my eyes was worrying me no end.

Then one day I tripped over the garden hose of a doctor friend of mine, in full evening dress. The doctor friend helped me up quickly and asked, 'Has your eyesight worsened a little? You may be developing a cataract, consult someone. And from now on use a stick.'

While I was deeply worried about the state of my eyes the Art School's Principal and his pet colleagues were delighted. They spread the news around that I would not be there long to bring the Art School to rack and ruin. I noticed that my eyesight was deteriorating progressively and I was finding it difficult to paint. I went for a set of magnifying glasses, big and small. I got a special pair of spectacles made with the upper halves of the glasses tinted black. For some days they seemed to help. But the blurred vision returned, the brush line did not fall at the right place or was indistinct. And I started working in oils.

But, finally, I decided to go to Delhi. At the end of February, 1957, I left for Delhi. I generally forget years and dates but I have not for-

gotten this particular day. I bought a number of weeklies on the train, but 1 could not read any.

An eminent doctor of Delhi examined my eyes and said, 'It is nothing; you just need a good surgeon.' I tried to tell him, as humbly as I could, that all the doctors who had seen my eyes since my childhood had advised against surgery. Smiling disdainfully he said, 'I do not want to hear what all your old doctors have said. Science has made great strides, the doctors of those days did not know all this. And what do you stand to lose? In medical terms you are already blind.'

I was laid out on the table. I could feel a pair of scissors or knife crossing my eye left to right. The doctor's assistant, also an eminent specialist, said, 'Sir, what are you doing?' And the doctor said, 'We are in difficulty, Benode-babu. Pray to God.'

Let me deal with the rest briefly. After spending a few days in the nursing home I came out of it, holding onto Leela's arms and wearing a pair of dark glasses. I could feel the heat of the sun, but I could not see its light.[77]

And I have not since, for nearly twenty years. Nor have I painted since, using a variety of colours on white paper.

Now I am an ambassador of darkness in this world of light.

*Notes*

1. Halley's Comet was seen in Indian skies in 1910 when Benodebehari would have been six years old.
2. A large open ground in the middle of Calcutta city.
3. Paintings done on bromide paper with powdered graphite or pigment with fingers or finger-shaped paper pencils.
4. A small town in Bengal.
5. A small town in Bihar.
6. Gum accasia, a thorny gum tree.
7. A kind of wild growth with a strong smell.
8. Cobra and vipers of various kinds.
9. A town on the old Darjeeling-Howrah Railway line, now in Pabna

District of Bangladesh.

10. The school Rabindranath Tagore, the world renowned poet, established in Santiniketan.
11. One of Tagore's close associates.
12. The name by which the school was known in its early days.
13. A small house Rabindranath stayed in during the early days of the ashram; now used, in its altered form, as a nursery school.
14. Michael Madhusudan Dutta's epic poem, whose Miltonic verse was not the usual fare young boys responded to.
15. A hall used for performances at Santiniketan.
16. Jagadanada Ray, an early teacher associate of Rabindranath Tagore.
17. The name the institution took when it was turned into a seat of higher learning, meaning to work as a' bridge between India and the world.
18. The art department of Visva-Bharati, conceived as an independent college.
19. Dhirendra Krishna Deb Burman, painter, and an early student of Kala Bhavana. Later, Principal of Kala Bhavana for a while.
20. Sanskrit scholar and teacher; an early associate of Rabindranath Tagore.
21. A building named after Tagore's deceased son Samindranath.
22. Ardhendu Prasad Banerjee, Hira Chand Dugar, and Krishna Kinkar Ghosh, all painters and early students of Kala Bhavana.
23. Asit Kumar Haldar, disciple of Abanindranath Tagore along with Nandalal Bose and others. Taught art in Santiniketan and Calcutta; was later Principal of the Government School of Arts and Crafts, Lucknow.
24. A building that has since been pulled down.
25. College of Music, Dance and Drama.
26. Reputed painter, muralist, designer, influential teacher, who gave a new orientation to art education in India.
27. An early teacher-associate of Rabindranath Tagore from Great Britain.
28. Probably a Japanese artisan in lacquer.
29. Ramendranath Chakravarti, painter, print maker, later Principal of Government Art School in Delhi and Calcutta.

30. Vinayak Rao Masoji, painter; taught in Kala Bhavana, Santiniketan for long years.

31. Known largely as the editor of an early book on 'Cochin Murals', and editor of an art journal, *Silpi;* was for some time Advisor to the Indian Government on Handicrafts Development in independent India. Principal of Kala Bhavana, Santiniketan, for a short while.

32. Painter, taught later in the Government School of Art and Crafts, Calcutta.

33. Satyendranath Banerjee, painter, taught later in the Government School of Art and Crafts, Calcutta.

34. Dr Stella Kramrisch, Viennese Art Historian, who came to Santiniketan in 1922 and lectured in Kala Bhavana. Later moved to Calcutta. Made a major contribution to the study of the traditional arts of India and their conceptual background. Held the Bageswari Chair in the Calcutta University. Even later moved to USA as the Keeper of the Indian Collection in the Philadelphia Museum of Art and lectured on Indian art in the University of Philadelphia.

35. Abanindranath Tagore, nephew of Rabindranath Tagore. Painter and ideologue of the so called Neo-Bengal art movement, one of the father figures of modern Indian art; at the same time an important writer in Bengali.

36. The court or the general council of the newly formed Visva-Bharati.

37. Famous statistician, close associate of Rabindranath Tagore. Founder of the well-Jhown Indian Statistical Institute, Calcutta.

38. Generally known as O.C. Ganguly. Barrister, art lover, an involved supporter of the new movement in art and persuasive critic. Editor *oiRupam* and the *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art.*

39. An artjournal edited and published by O.C. Ganguly, which is an informative sourcebook of the art thinking of those times.

40. Influential Bengali periodical (side-by-side with the English periodical *Modern Review,* both edited by Ramananda Chattopadhyay) which had a big cultural impact on the reading public of that time.

41. Prabhat Mohan Banerjee, painter, contemporary of Benodebehari; one of the early supporters of Karu Sangha.

42. The celebrated south-side verandah in one of the buildings in Jorasanko, where the three Tagore brothers Gaganendranath, Abanindranath and Samarendranath, sat and painted, met visitors, etc.

43. Ramkinkar Baij, painter, sculptor; along with Nandalal and Benodebehari, one of the most important figures in modern Indian art.

44. Painter, later Principal, School of Arts and Crafts, Hyderabad.

45. Painter, sculptor, taught art at the Doon School, Dehra Dun; later became Principal, Government College of Arts and Crafts, Lucknow.

46. Sylvain Levi, reputed and influential French Orientalist.

47. Moritz Witernitz, reputed German Orientalist, who wrote a well-known history of Sanskrit Literature.

48. Takakusu junjiro (1866-1945—who assumed the pen name Takakusu Setcho), scholar of Sanskrit, Indian philosophy and Buddhism; Professor at Tokyo University from 1899-1927. Published translations of Buddhist literature in Japanese.

49. Also known as Tawaraya Sotatsu (c.1576-1643). Founder of Rimpa style of painting; was a great influence on Nihonga style of modern Japanese painting.

50. Ogatta Korin (1658-1716) whose real name was Ogata Koretomi. Painter and designer of Fdo period; admired for his gorgeous screens in rich colours against gold ground; influenced by Sotatsu.

51. Indian nationalist of the colonial era who moved to Japan and operated there; worked to strengthen ties between Japan and India.

52. Takeuchi Seiho (1864-1942), whose real name was Takeuchi Tsunekichi, one of the pioneers of Nihonga painting.

53. Yokoyama Taikan (1868-958), a close associate of Okakuro Kakuzo. Along with Hishida Shunso he was one of the first modern Japanese painters to visit India and establish contacts with Indian artists. While in India he grew close to Abanindranath and Rabindranath and the contact was kept up by later visits to his studio in Japan by Rabindranath and other artists from Santiniketan.

54. Kempo Arai belonged to the school led by Okakuro Kakuzo. Rabindranath commissioned him to do copies of paintings by Kanzan and Taikan and invited him to teach at the Vichitra Studio, Calcutta. He travelled in India. He is reported to have done some copies of Ajanta murals. He was close to Nandalal Bose.

55. A middle-aged female attendant.

56. Art historian and critic, editor of Japanese art journal *Kokka,* author of *The Essays on Oriental Painting* (published by Bernard Quaritch, London 1910).

57. Director of Tokyo Art Museum at that time.
58. Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, writer, reformer, teacher, important figure in Bengal's cultural renaissance; whose language primers are still in use.
59. Rabindranath's famous song starting:

    *dukha jagani ay tomay gan sunabo*
    *ghoom bhangani ay tomay gan sunabo.*
60. Painter and teacher of repute, known for his realistic paintings and portraits.
61. Wu Hsiao Ling was his full name.
62. Hazari Prasad Dwivedi. Professor of Hindi and Head, Hindi Bhavana. Scholar in Sanskrit and Hindi. Author of many critical essays and novels.
63. Painter, architectural draughtsman, close associate of Rabindranath Tagore and Nandalal Bose.
64. Student of Kala Bhavana, painter, sculptor, teacher in later days.
65. Leela Mukherjee (nee Mansukhani) studied in Kala Bhavana; painter and sculptor.
66. Kripal Singh Shekawat, student of Kala Bhavana, established painter and designer. Connoisseur of Indian traditional arts.
67. 'Mani' for short. The translator was a student of Kala Bhavana from 1944-47.
68. Devaki Nandan Sharma, student of Sailendranath Dey in Jaipur; painter, muralist, later Head of the Department, Fine Arts, Vanasthali Vidyapith, Rajasthan.
69. An administrative assistant.
70. Artist trained at in the School of Arts and Crafts, Calcutta; taught art in a school in Kathmandu.
71. Famous sweet shops and eateries of Calcutta and their specialties.
72. Student and close associate of Benodebehari; later known as one of the leading artist-designers of modern India.
73. Kshitindranath Majumdar. Close disciple of Abanindranath Tagore along with Nandalal Bose, Asit Kumar Haldar and others; taught art in Allahabad.
74. Dame Laura Knight, ARA, an established British portrait painter.
75. Engineer in the service of the Nepal Government.

76. This means 'monkey garden'.

77. This is a rather dramatized version of his loss of eyesight.

According to a report from the eye specialist who performed the operation, despite the unsatisfactory condition of the eye and the risks involved, the operation had gone off well and the lens had been removed without any loss of blood or vitreous humour. But during the healing period some bleeding had taken place due to whatever reason and iritis had set in. This was treated in various ways for over a year and a half. Unfortunately this did not have the desired effect. The available reports and letters indicate that he did not lose his eyesight during the operation; for nearly eighteen months after, the doctors hoped that he would recover his eyesight to some extent.

# *KATTAMASHAI*[1]

PARTI

Under a canopy[2] strung from horizon to horizon people of various forms and colours have gathered. They have all come to see the magician perform.

Rudranarayan,^ the chief character of the story, has also come to the gathering. To see the magical feats. But his eyes are on the onlookers. Rudranarayan looks at the picturesque crowd. There is no end to their variety in dress and trinkets, gait and deportment. And no limit to Rudranarayan's wonder. Like everyone else he also does not see the magician, who is perhaps behind some curtain or within the crowd. But without caring to find that out Rudranarayan's eye wanders among the people.

The magician's most miraculous feat, the game of fate, is about to start. As if called by his spells a whirlwind, like that of a summer-noon, enters the place. The cards of fate are blown about in the air. They fall like dry leaves to the ground; then float again into the air. The place resounds with shouts, 'Six-Five-Ace, King-Queen-Jack, Nine-Two-Three!' With the sweep of the wind people run after the cards in all directions. They are all heated up like locomotives. In his excitement Rudranarayan's tongue, too, has gone dry from root to tip. He is unable to control himself. He jumps up and snatches a card and turns

it around. And sees that it is the ace of diamonds.

A red spot in the heart of a white card. What does it signify? The arrow of death or the arrow of flowers,[4] both of which are turned on it? Fixing his eye on the red spot Rudranarayan wonders on which side his future lies. On the side of death or a new life's unfolding? But, to his amazement, the red spot breaks up and scatters on the field of white paper. Its large and small fragments, like blood-stains, dissolve little by little. And out of that emerges a vexatious yellow glow. As if a lot of jaundiced people were rubbing their flanks against him. But this unsettling yellow light gradually loses strength and gives way to heavy darkness. To whichever side he turns his eye he sees the same sight, of unrelieved darkness. And no signs of any life except his own breathing. What is written in his fate is now clear to him. He is anxious to save himself. But his search for succour lands him in a tougher and thornier predicament. To him this darkness is new. Its feel is strange and unfamiliar. Where is he? Which way should he go? Before he finds an answer to these questions he falls with a jerk into a cushioned armchair. His eyes are covered with a pair of dark glasses. And there he sits motionless, like a flame in the depths of a cavern.

Rudranarayan is restless to get a grip on time and space. The foot-falls and voices of a lot of people come to his ears.

For Rudranarayan, now the world of men is there only by inference. He has still not found a way of knowing it directly. But gradually the voices become distinct and legible. In voices loud and low he hears people discuss a Kattamashai. Assuming there is someone with that name in his dark surroundings he enquires, 'Who is Kattamashai? Where is he?' He is told, 'Sir, you are our Kattamashai. We are your well-wishers. We are setting around you all the things you need. Here is your table and, on top of it, your cigarettes and matches. In front of you the glass of water and the bottle of medicine.' Rudranarayan says, 'I know no Kattamashai. My name is Rudranarayan.' But several voices assert, 'We, on our side, do not know any Rudranarayan.' Now Rudranarayan gets heated up and shouts, 'Why are you pulling my leg? I am no Kattamashai.' But it is of no use. He is unable to stop

them from using that name.

Rudranarayan asks, 'Why is it so dark? Why don't you put the lights on?'

From all four sides numerous voices say, 'All the lights are on, Kattamashai.'

Now, from the depths of the underworld, a ghostly roaring enters his heart. It stamps around and dances. Under its battering noise his inner being feels like it will be smashed into smithereens. But Rudranarayan's inside is built with the bones of Dadichi.[5] Its tenacity is immense. The little skiff of Rudranarayan's life rolls and pitches, as it were, on a rain-lashed sea. The flame in the cavern splutters; it even looks as if the light of his existence could go out any time.

He is totally unable to accept the present. To Kattamashai his T in the image of Rudranarayan seems essential, for doesn't the cycle of birth, existence and death itself depend on this tiny T? He is unable to resign himself to his present condition. Like a wounded cobra that tears down with its fangs whatever is around it, Rudranarayan attacks and tears down his surroundings with his strident questions—What? Why? Where?—and, slowly, wears himself down. His condition is like that of an uncorked bottle of acid. From within him rise acrid sighs. He lies wrapped in their coils. But a murmuring breeze comes in through an open window. And wafts away their smell. Then Rudranarayan feels better. He comes to realize that in this land of darkness he is no other than Kattamashai. From then onward he is seen in his chair, wearing his pair of dark glasses.

Kattamashai remains sitting. The uproar inside him is no longer so audible. He is not able any more to tear down things around him with his barbed questions. He has lost that power While in this state something like a flash of lightning goes past him and opens his inner eye. He sees Rudranarayan drowning in a blue whirlpool. He shouts, 'Rudranarayan, wait, let me have a word with you.' Rudranarayan says, 'I am coming in a moment,' and then disappears. A spot of white foam floats on the blue waters. Then that too disappears.

With the disappearance of Rudranarayan, sighs of despair rise

again from his mind. But hope's creeper thrives on the fertile ground of despair. Without his knowing, hope's tendrils grow round his body and mind, cover them up. He can still hear the voice of Rudranarayan. He calls out, 'Where are you, Rudranarayan?'

'Here, right below your feet, drifting on the waters of the underworld. Pull me up.'

'I can't see where you are. You have taken away my torch. In any case what will you do after coming here?'

'What do you mean? Why should an accomplished man like me have any doubts on that account?'

'Rudranarayan, this is a difficult place. It is struggle all through. You can't get at anything here with your pair of eyes. What you see with those is a fancy-dress show, a passing wave-play of light and shadow. Within my ten fingers I hold a hard, sharp, polished, colourless world. Which resounds with colourless clamour, bodiless voices. In my world there are no evident contacts between smell, touch, sound and shape. I cannot hold them together within my grasp. Have you, Rudranarayan, kept intact the logbooks of my experience?'

'No, I have burnt them up. I can't read their script.'

'Goodbye then, Rudranarayan, between the two of us there is an impassable chasm. It cannot be crossed. Do you hear me?'

There is no response from Rudranarayan. He seems to have drifted away somewhere on the waters of the underworld.

Kattamashai is now up on his feet. He is ready for new adventure. He has made up his mind to explore this new world which has brought him so much pain and affliction. Using all his strength he makes an effort to move forward. But despite much pulling and pushing, he finds himself in the same old chair; he has not moved an inch.

The weight of the accumulated darkness makes Kattamashai gasp. He is not able to find his way around. Both his mind and body are exhausted by the effort. This exhaustion envelops him like the sultry heat of August.[6]

From all four sides the sounds of birds and beasts come to his ears.

These do not move him. But when he hears the sounds of men he feels a bright orb of light loom over his mind. The thought of this doubles his exhaustion.

Kattamashai's days pass in sitting up or lying down. As time rolls on there is some variety even in this routine. He learns that to drive out the fatigue of sitting up it is good to stretch out and sleep.

Kattamashai makes an effort to get up. He feels around for his stick near his chair. All at once, his hand comes upon some clammy furry thing. He shouts with apprehension. 'What is this?'

'I am Shyam, babu.'

'Who are you? What are you doing here?'

'*Ginnima* has asked me to sit here, babu, to attend on you.'

'What's that furry thing?'

'Babu, my hair.'

'Hair? Is that how it feels?'

Kattamashai runs his hands through his hair, and finds he is right.

'What all can you do?'

'I can cook rice.'

'Can you make tea?'

'*Ginnima* has taught me, babu.'

'Then go and make some tea.'

Kattamashai hears a tapping noise. There are endless varieties of such noises—why has one to hear them all? Kattamashai's palms move over the table top, like an overturned fish, searching for a matchbox. Suddenly he is perplexed. From somewhere some warm water spills onto his body. And there is a clatter. Kattamashai shouts in panic. Everyone comes running. Kattamashai asks, 'What has happened?' They all say, 'Oh nothing, the teacup turned over.'

He moves from one confusion to another. Across Kattamashai's arms some weird thing crawls and passes along. Kattamashai cannot figure out what it is. His wife says, 'Oh nothing, it is only the edge of my sari.'

Another cup of tea appears on the table. Shyam touches Kattamashai's hand to the side of the cup and says, 'Here, tea.'

'Good tea.'

Shyam sits on his knees near Kattamashai's chair and waits on

him. Answering his wishes he runs from the living room to the kitchen, from the kitchen to the garden. He is tireless. Kattamashai asks, 'Shyam, can you read?' Shyam answers, '1 have a book of Gopal Bhand's stories, shall I read it to you, babu?'

Shyam reads Gopal Bhand's stories. His manner of reading itself amuses Kattamashai. From time to time he bursts into loud laughter and says, 'You have made me laugh a lot, Shyam; I had almost forgotten how to.' Saying that he grows serious again.

For the last few days Shyam is not quite himself. A kind of curiosity is going round and round in his mind, like a dung-beetle trapped in a cup. He could not, at long last, control himself. So he asks, 'Babu, why don't you ever take off your dark glasses?' Like a man who has stubbed his toe, Kattamashai jumps up with a start. 'You good for nothing brat,' he shouts, 'when someone is nice to you, you clamber on his head! You couldn't find any other place to play your silly tricks! Get out of here!'

Shyam says, 'Babu, I won't do it again.'

Kattamashai is now able to know when it is morning, evening or sunset. But not every day is he able to get hold of the time correctly. Shyam places a cup of tea before Kattamashai at the usual time, and says, 'Babu, tea.'

'You have brought tea already? It is not yet nine.'

'Sir, it is ten now.'

'How can that be? I didn't hear the train pass!'

'There is a strike on today. The trains haven't run!'

So that morning Kattamashai lost the nine o'clock hour.

At the crow of any cock Kattamashai wakes up in a hurry thinking it is morning. Then the crows and the *koek* take over. Then the milkman goes by on his bicycle. Then the hawker comes. Each of these ring an hour in Kattamashai's world.

Every evening Kattamashai sits out for a while. But today he is tired of waiting for the evening.

'What, Shyam, isn't it evening yet?'

'Babu, it is.'

'But how's that? I didn't hear the neighbour's maid scrub her pots

and pans?'

'Babu, their maid has run away.'

Kattamashai has learnt by now that the minds and the moods of men are not that stable, to rely on them is to waste a lot of time. But Nature does not let one down that way. It has its laws. It is true that crows go round cawing the whole day, but the other birds have a better sense of time. Even dogs do not jump around and bark all the time. Just as there is honey in each cell of a honeycomb, in each pocket of time things happen. Man interferes with these laws. He trims a tall tree short, he grows a short tree tall, he turns a red flower blue, a blue flower red. But, despite this, Nature's laws persist. In the vegetable and animal world each thing comes into being or dies in its time and place; in its time and place it turns into a fossil. Then it stays immortal in the glass case of a museum.

Kattamashai reaches a sudden conviction—the real thing for him would be try to be a fossil by dint of inner effort. While studying science his daughter had brought home from somewhere a piece of fossilized wood. She had then moved on to study music. This fossil was lying abandoned in the midst of his papers. Shy am had cleaned the table but left the fossil where it was. Kattamashai places his hand on the fossil and makes a concentrated effort to become one.

Unkempt hair, unpressed clothes, brittle temper; the walls of his house and the neighbourhood splinter with his shouts. His wife says, 'Why do you shout so much?' Shyam asks, 'What does babu want?' Kattamashai says, 'Do not disturb me in my efforts.' His consumption of tea and cigarettes has increased so much that he has lost his appetite. He has no taste for food. It is enough if some kind of food goes down his gullet. Taste and flavour are of no account. He feels he is getting ahead fast. He can see the symptoms. His bones are pushing out through the flesh. He runs his hands over his knees and senses that it won't be long before he is a fossil. There is a shade of pride in his heart. His hands are no longer eager to hold new objects. On the palm of his hand the print of a fossil is clearly visible.

On one of those days Shyam's delighted voice comes to his ears. 'Babu, a huge dragonfly!' The dragonfly in the meanwhile comes and

perches on Kattamashai's nose. And the next instant flies up his back and on to the wall. Shyam is not able, by any means, to lay hands on it. Every time he makes a sweep with his hand, it is already beyond his reach, now on the bedstead, now on his own head. Through all this commotion this 'Menaka'[7] of a dragonfly breaks Kattamashai's penance. And finally darts out like an arrow towards the open green. And its antics bring a ripple of animation into Kattamashai's dark world.

Frustrated in his effort to be a fossil Kattamashai says, 'Shyam, throw that stone away. From tomorrow bring beautiful flowers and put them on my table.'

With immense pleasure Shyam goes around gathering flowers. Kattamashai does not get his morning tea at the right time. When Shyam returns, he shouts, 'Where did you go?'

'Today I have brought the most beautiful flowers,' he replies.

Shyam brings flowers of all colours, red, blue yellow. He gives elaborate descriptions of the colours. And from time to time, in a spurt of enthusiasm, exclaims, 'Babu, how beautiful they are!'

Colour, however, has no place in Kattamashai's eyes. Nor does it leave any impress on his mind. He just tries to understand it notionally. A bee of emotion hums around, which is no more to Kattamashai's liking. It annoys him. But when he takes the flowers in his hands and touches them with his fingers, their soft, smooth delicate feel gives him pleasure. By feeling their differences in shape he gets a picture of the floral world. And he exclaims with Shyam, 'How beautiful!' But the composite reality of form and colour divides up in Kattamashai's hands—like he himself divided up one day.

He takes a flower in his hands and feels it from all sides. The soft smoothness of its petals affects him as deeply as its fragrance. When Shyam starts describing the colours he shouts him down. Spreading all kinds of flowers on the table he feels around them with his fingers, in silence. Between the flowers the table seems novel. The flowers and the table together present to him a new experience of darkness.

He realizes that the world of beauty that depends on colour, which in

*Young Benodebehari with elder brothers, photograph Mrinalini Mukherjee collection.*

*Benodebehari, early 30s, photograph Mrinalini Mukherjee collection.*

*Benodebehan mth Nandalal Base and other early students of Kala Bhavan in Santiniketan in 1936, photograph Mrinalini Mukherjee collection.*

ABOVE: *Benodebehari with Rashbehari Bose and other unidentified persons in Japan, photograph Mrinalini Mukherjee collection.*

BELOW: *Benodebehari visiting a school in Japan, photograph Mrinalini Mukherjee collection.*

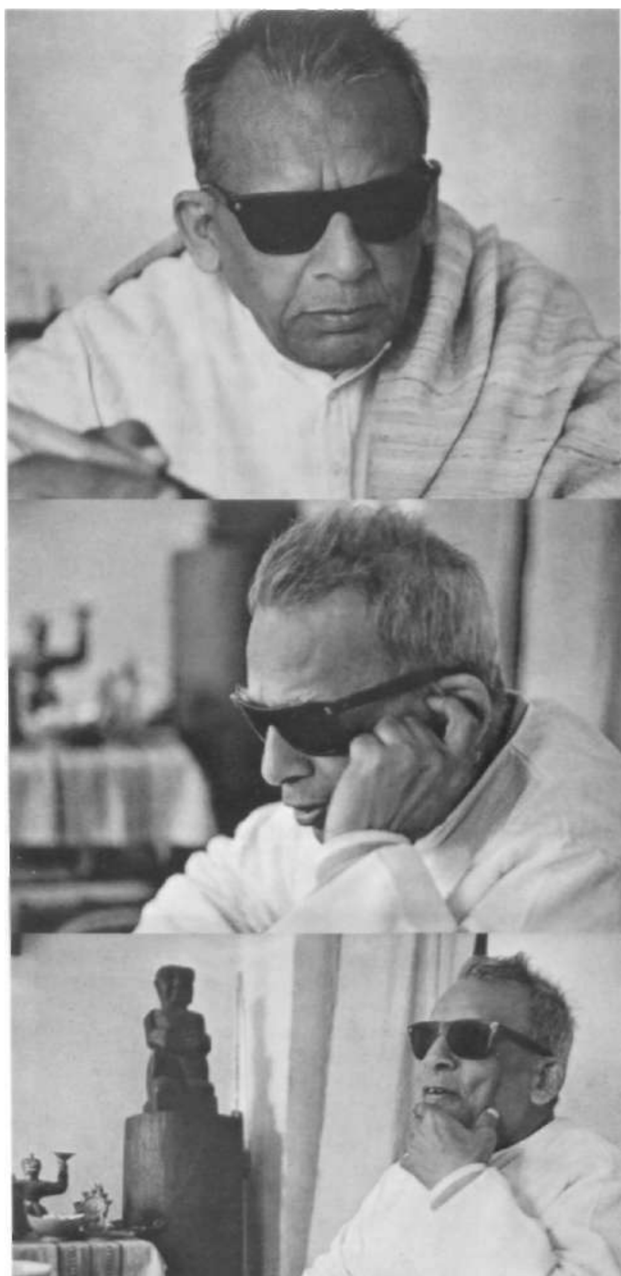
ABOVE: *Yukihiko Yasuda, Ryuzo Saito, Benodebehari Mukherjee, Kanpo Arai, photograph Mrinalini Mukherjee collection.*

BELOW: *Seison Meda, Kanpo Ami, Benodebehari Mukherjee, photograph Mrinalini Mukherjee collection.*

*Benodebehari with wife Leela Mukherjee and Riten Mazumdar in Nepal, 1949-50, photograph Mnnalini Mukherjee collection.*

ABOVE: *Benodebehari with Leela, Kularatnam, Riten Mazumdar and Kancha (servant) at Kul Ratnam's house in Kathmandu, 1949-50, photograph Mrinalini Mukherjee collection.*
BELOW: *Sudhir Khastagir, Benodebehari, Bishwanath Mukherjee, and Banbehari Ghosh at Jamia Milia, 1951-52, photograph Mrinalini Mukherjee collection.*

ABOVE: *Benodebehari after losing his eyesight, photograph Mrinalini Mukherjee collection.*
BELOW: *Benodebehari with Sukhumoy Mitra, Somnath Hore, Iiamkinkar, A. Ramachandran, K.G. Subramanyan, and Dinkar Kowshik at a Graphic Workshop at Kala Bhavan, Santiniketan 1968, photograph Mrinalini Mukherjee collection.*



*Benodebehari, 1972, photographs Mrinalini Mukherjee collection.*

*Benodebehan on the occasion of receiving the honorary degree of Desikottama, 1977, photograph Mrinalini Mukherjee collection.*

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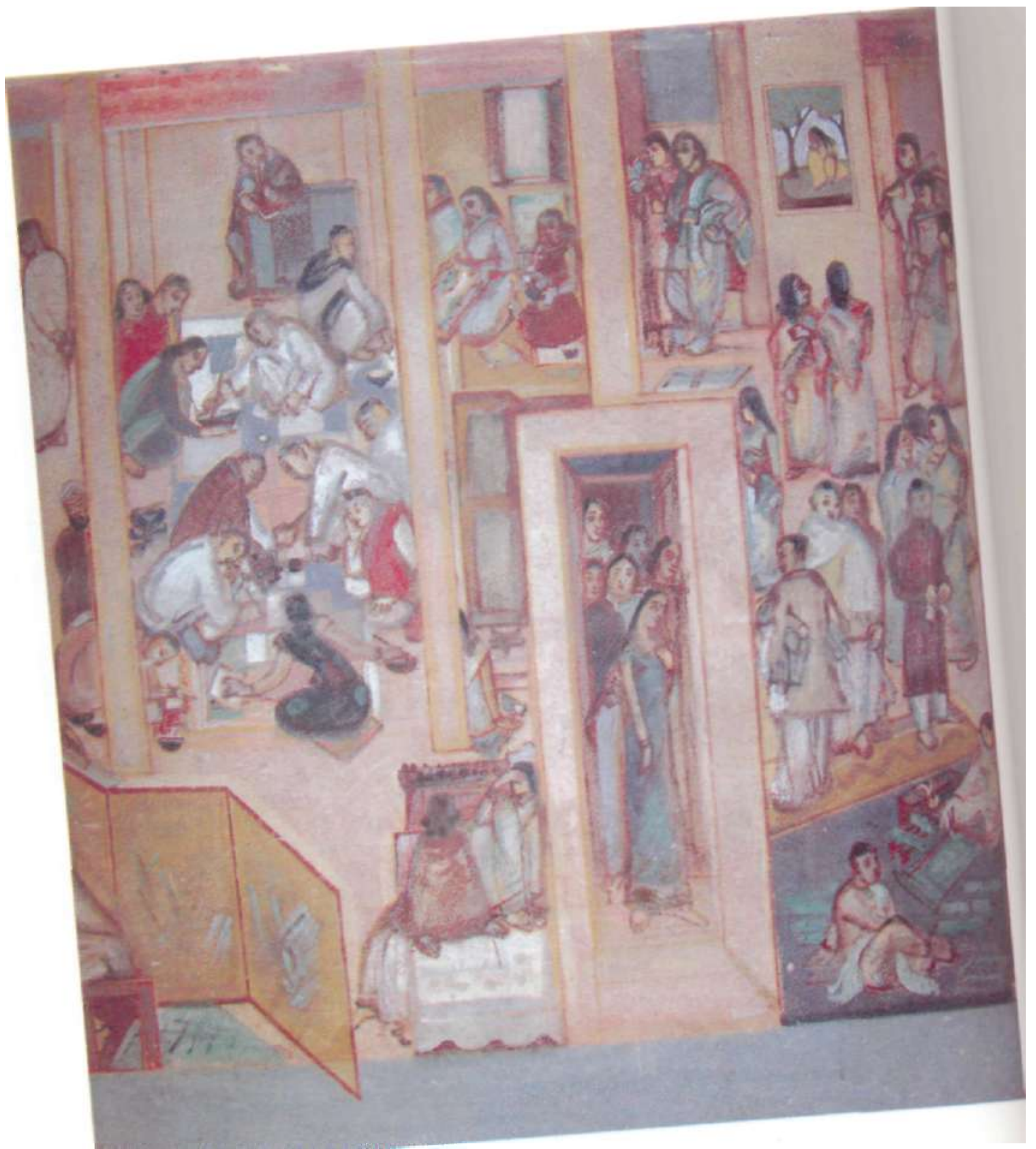
*Detail of Benodebehari's mural on the ceiling in Kola Bhavana, Santiniketan, 1940.*

*Detail of Benodebehari's 1940 ceiling mural in colour (recent photograph).*



*Detail, Benodebekan's 1942 mural attheCheemBhavan, Sayitiniketan.*

' ^ Ghat > '»*• photograph curtesy K.G. Subramanyan

*Simul, 1944, photograph courtesy KG. Subramanyan.*

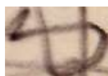
*Benodebehan Self Portrait, 1946, photograph courtesy Mrinalini Mukherjee.*

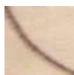
*Buffalo* (ABOVE) *and Sadhu* (BELOW). *Post-blmdness wax sculpture by Benodebeiian, photographs courtesy Mriwxlini Mukherjee.*

*Figure with dark glasses, post-blindness paper cut by Benodebehari, photograph courtesy Mrinalini Mukherjee .*

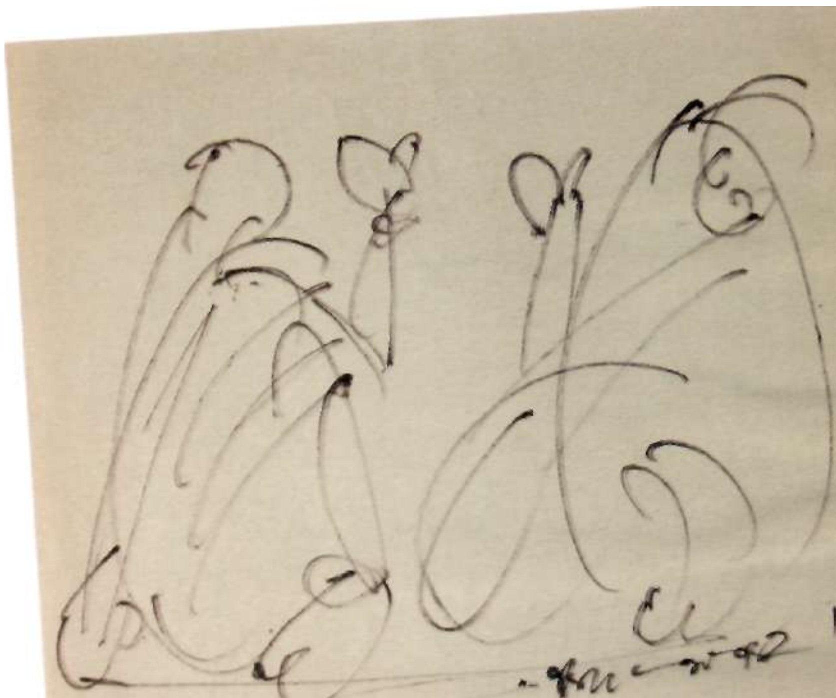
*Ufe* « A *spectacles* (ABOVE) a^ *VastraMran* (BELOW). M - « « * * " -
i, *photograph courtesy Mrinalini Mukherjee.*

*l-blindness felt pen drawing by Benodebehari, 1962, photograph courtesy Mrinalim Mukherjee.*





*Post-blindness felt pen drawing by Benodebehari, 1967, photograph courtesy Mrinalini Mukherjee.*



*Post-blindness felt pen drawing by Benodebefuin, 1972, photograph courtesy Mrinalini Mukherjee.*

its turn depends on light, is finally lost to him. To him the playful rippling of light and shadow is a lost thing. All attempts to regain it had been in vain. What he gets now are reverberations of the forms of darkness. Not beautiful, maybe, but as real to him as the pulsations of his heart. Within this new quickening the darkness in front of him becomes effulgent. He has forgotten his past losses to a large extent. He discovers in this solid darkness a true manifestation of depth.

When Kattamashai was engrossed in this new experience he heard someone whisper in his mind, 'Kattamashai, you, perhaps, have found something, but better make sure whether your find is real or spurious, ruminate a little, consult the lexicon, look up the almanac, or how else will you discern the real from the unreal?' And then vanish with a smile.

Today, there is a big hubbub in Kattamashai's house. He comes out after his bath and is unable to find his table or bed or anything else. He hits about with his stick and spins around; he stumbles on various hard and soft objects. Struck by a curtain blowing in the wind he shouts, 'What is all this?' He continues to shout, 'Where has Shyam gone? Where are you Shyam, you who reek of dungcake-and-onion-and-oil-and-soap?' Standing close to him, Shyam goes on saying, 'Babu, I am here,' in a low voice. Shyam knows that if he leads him by the hand Kattamashai will find his bearings, but he fears his touch will startle him.

But Kattamashai's shouts have blocked his own ears. He is unable to hear what Shyam is saying. Seeing this, Shyam does the reckless thing—he has no other option. He catches hold of Kattamashai's hand, pulls him around, seats him on the armchair and says, 'Babu, this is your chair.'

Dropping into his chair with a plop and placing both his hands on the table, Kattamashai says, 'Ah, you have saved me. My heart is going pit-a-pat, make me some tea. And, Shyam, why couldn't I find my way about all this while?'

'Sir, when you went for your bath I rearranged your room. But everything is here.'

'So, that's it,' says Kattamashai and stands up. He wants to figure out properly the placement of furniture and things in the room. So far he had known the room as long and rectangular but today he feels it as a square. How has this happened? He walks one way, he hits against the wall, he walks the other way, he knocks against the cot. He calls out to Shyam, Arrey, what have you done here?'

'Sir, I have set your table and chair and things in the middle of the room. Thinking you will get the breeze better.'

'Well done,' says Kattamashai, 'you have made my old room feel new!'

No sooner does he stretch himself out under the mosquito net, than some unseen finger seems to press the button of a television set. Kattamashai sees an endless revue of gigantic beasts, obsolete scripts and familiar faces. From time to time certain awe-striking objects also appear which make him wake up with a start. Today too he has woken up with a start in front of a deep abyss. He sits up on the bed. The night has a mid-ocean stillness. A cawing sound rises and gets lost in it. 'Is this the fullmoon night?' Kattamashai wonders. It is ages since he has seen a moonlit night. A still picture hovers before his unwinking eyes—a sandy river bank, a thick-leaved jamun tree with a shadow deeper than itself. He feels a great desire to get out into the moonlight.

He lifts the mosquito net and puts his hand out through the window. The night is cool. He pulls his hand back. It feels as if it is moist with moonlight.

When the birds begin to twitter Kattamashai gets up. Shyam comes with his tea.

He asks him, 'Arrey, are these the days of the waxing moon?'

'Yes, last night was a new moon.

'New moon?'

The shadow of the new moon falls pat on the full moon of his fantasy. 'New moon?' he repeats.

The morning sun spills over Kattamashai's bed and falls on the polished table. Bits of sunlight glitter on Kattamashai's hair, shirt,

hands and feet. But in the region where Kattamashai lives there is no trace of any light. Kattamashai has no regrets on this account. He has no use for light any more. The throbbing life of the world of darkness and its novel beauty has come within his grasp. He has also won back his lost room. If he had not tried to examine the truth with Shyam's help he could even have preserved his full moon intact. But his mind had cautioned him one day to verify the truth or otherwise of things by thought. So he resolves to examine the veracity of things by thought.

He has been trying for a long time to push out old thoughts with new and see whether he cannot wriggle out of all these and get to another stage of thinking. Gradually these big and small thoughts agglomerate into strange composites and come before Kattamashai. They display a great variety of faces and gestures. Some come challengingly with shield and sword. Some sit on the shoulder like Sinbad's old man and refuse to dismount. Some go on tickling him to his utter dismay. These are still bearable. But not those sickly ones that run around, burst and spread a festering odour. He does not know how to escape them. But today he has made up his mind to break out of their siege. He tries to take a new position and reason out whether he is the master of his thoughts or his thoughts are spinning him around. Then all at once he is swallowed up by a gaping thought—table, chair and all. He knows now how strong thought currents can be. But with equal unexpectedness he comes up to the surface in a new quarter. He sees in front of him a beautiful garden. Entering it he sees there an assortment of known and unknown flowers. A tree is in bloom. Its fragrant flowers are his favourites. In these strange surroundings he puts out his hand to pluck one of these flowers. In an instant, the garden and everything else vanishes. There appears instead a ruined mansion with open gates. He goes inside. He sees rows and rows of rooms. But all their doors are locked. He has a nagging feeling that there is something inside these rooms. He walks ahead past these locked rooms, till he comes to a big door with no lock on it. He pushes open the door and goes inside. An enormous room, but there is nothing anywhere.

Only a huge mirror. Everyone likes to look at his face in a mirror, Kattamashai too feels a strong desire to do so. He goes and stands before it to see his image. But enormous as the mirror is, and edged with an ornate frame, it throws back no reflection.

In a while Kattamashai sees on it the image of something, but it is not him. Good heavens! It is the image of a nude woman! He is powerless to draw back or turn his face away. He goes on staring at this naked female figure. He goes on looking at this reflection without batting an eyelid. His whole being recoils but still he moves towards the mirror as if drawn by a magnet. Then he steps back. He says to himself, 'What a scandal! The face seems so familiar! What a shame! What a rotten shame!' In an excited voice he shouts, 'Who is this woman?' The tantalizing nude has a mocking smile on her lips.

'I am the one you have been thinking of all these days,' she says.

'Impossible! I never have had any sinful thoughts of this kind!'

'Hypocrite!'

'Who, me? A hypocrite!'

'Not just a hypocrite. A coward too.'

'What? I? A coward and a hypocrite?'

Saying that, Kattamashai lunges at the figure. But he misses his aim.

Frustrated and burning with anger, Kattamashai is in a furious state. He sees several such figures around but is unable to get at any one of them. Losing all sense of direction he runs around like a wild bull. But when he stops, exhausted, he sees his own image in the mirror. Just where he had seen the enchantress. Clutching in his hands a blood-stained dagger.

Kattamashai is lounging in his usual chair. He feels a great sense of peace. Such as comes after seeing a cataclysmic vision. There is no wave of agitation in his heart. He just recalls the whole incident—the derelict house—the dangling locks—the mirror; what does all this mean?

The facts fade out as in a magic show. Only the padlocked rooms linger in the mind. Musing over what they possibly held, he feels he

too has an enormous lock within him. He is very much like these mouldy locked rooms. He is still at a loss to know what there is within himself.

Kattamashai is suddenly taken ill. He is in bed. His wife, daughter, friends, well-wishers all go round and round him, and sit and talk. That is a new kind of experience.

Upon recovery he comes back to his usual seat. He does not like to be in bed anymore. And his mouth waters at the thought of various forbidden foods. This is a curious side of convalescence. He is back in health. He feels a special solicitude for his every limb and feature. An irrational sense of joy fountains out from all sides. Shyam calls out. 'Babu, ma'am has asked you to take this medicine.'

Kattamashai gulps down the medicine and washes it down with some water. Shyam notices that Kattamashai's forehead does not wrinkle when he takes the medicine. He takes this as a sign of his being in a good mood.

Kattamashai enquires, 'What is that noise?'

'Babu, they are ramming on a roof. A house is coming up in the east. So this window is blocked up. The morning sun won't come this way anymore.'

'Oh, blocked up, is it?'

'It's a huge house.'

'Are all the windows blocked?'

'No, the door and window to the west are open. The evening sun will come through there.'

"Well, if some sun comes, it's all right.'

Shyam has his eyes fixed on Kattamashai's face. He doesn't feel so scared of his babu anymore.

'Babu, I have made a toy.'

'A toy? Show me.'

Kattamashai puts his left hand forward. And a small object drops into it. He goes round it with his fingers. And sees that it is a smooth and shiny little cow.

'You made it?' he asks.

'Yes babu.'

'What did you make it with?'

'Babu, with wax.'

'Give me some wax. I too will try to make toys.

No more siestas for Kattamashai. Shyam and Kattamashai sit side by side and make toys. The only difference is that he sits on the chair and Shyam sits on the mat. The days pass quickly. The sounds of the passing train or the hawker no more reach Kattamashai's ears. He goes on modelling the soft wax with his fingers, pressing it into long strips or round bits as he likes. 'Babu, please make a toy,' requests Shyam.

His fingers have now become adept in pressing wax into whatever shape he wants. Under their pressure various shapes emerge. Of these, Shyam can now say which are of men and which of beasts.

One day Kattamashai tells him, 'Arrey, let me see that cow of yours.'

'Sir, I have broken it down. Shall I make a dog?'

'You broke it?'

'I have no more wax and I want to make a dog badly. We have a dog at home now.'

Kattamashai too uses up all his wax, making figure after figure. He takes his cue from Shyam. He breaks down the older figures and fashions new ones. He has no more shortage of material. He makes his figures and lines them up. With one hand he models new figures, with the other he rubs the old ones down.

One day Kattamashai wonders: how can he decide whether these figures, made with so much care and effort, have come out right or wrong? Especially as others do not see what he sees. And he does not see what others do. He wishes for once that he had a friend he could confide in. To whom he could show the figures and ask to pick and choose.

You can't catch friends in a net like you can catch fish. Only by a stroke of fortune can you get a real friend. During the last few days Chatturjay and Kattamashai have grown to be friends. Chatturjay is a

ripe sunburnt fruit of the tree of life, with no trace of rawness anywhere. Someone you can call a faultless old man. Between them they gossip, discuss current issues and talk high philosophy. Kattamashai often asks Chatturjay various questions just to hear his juicy pronouncements. One day Kattamashai asked him, 'Chatturjay, haven't you ever felt a desire to have a vision of God?'

'Yes, I did once, and had the vision too.'

'You mean you really saw God?'

'Yes, with my own eyes. Let me tell you the story. A long time ago I went on a pilgrimage. I do not remember now to which holy place. I placed flowers at the feet of numerous gods and goddesses. And the *pandas* fleeced me soundly. I asked my *panda* one day, "I have now seen many idols. But is there real God anywhere? Can anyone of you tell?" As soon as I asked that, *panda-thakur*[10] replied, "Come along, I shall show you. But it will cost you money." Well, I didn't mind spending a little money to see God face to face.

'The panda took me to some place. There I saw two old men, sitting opposite each other, smeared with ashes and crowned with matted hair. *Panda* said, "Keep standing here. You will see all you want to see." Do you know what I saw? Between these two old men lay a heap of pebbles. One of them showed his closed palm to the other and asked is it *there* or *not there?* The other fellow said *there.* Then the first fellow waved his open palm in the front of his nose and said it is *not there.* As soon as one said it is *there,* the other said it is *not there.*

'This went on and on. Whether it was there or not there could not be established.

'I asked the *panda.* "How long has this been going?" The *panda* said, "It is written in our books that this game started in the age of truth. The last fourteen generations of ancestors have all been witness to it." "And when will this end?" I enquired.

'The *panda* said, "Babu, we do not know when this game will end." So, Katta, what the *panda* can't say, how can you and I?'

'You have made this all up, Chatturjay.'

'Who says I made it up? Your wax figure is *there* when it is in your hands, when you give it into mine it is *not there.* Do you understand?'

'Then you do not believe in God?'

'Who says so? But as soon as one gets into any big issue this game of is *there-is not there* is bound to crop up. How do I know what is there within this wax that you make your figures with. Maybe, if you refer all this to the Statistical Institute, they may compute the probabilities and say who is right.'

Kattamashai : 'Where, Chatturjay, do you get your stock of fun? I am unable to laugh like you!'

Chatturjay: 'This Katta, is the thaw, we shall talk about it some other day. I'll take your leave today.'

Kattamashai gets a little depressed by these last words of Chatturjay. He fiddles around with one of his figures and muses over them. At that moment Vatuk Maiti comes in uninvited. Kattamashai cannot stand him. The gentleman is an inveterate do-gooder. He starts giving advice to any man he comes across. Entering the room Vatuk Maiti asks, 'Chatturjay was here, wasn't he?'

Katta: 'He was.'

Vatuk: 'Did he tell you anything?'

Katta: 'No, nothing special.'

Vatuk: 'Haven't you heard that his grown-up son died in an accident?'

Kattamashai is taken aback and says, 'No, I have not.'

Vatuk: 'This is the amazing thing. His son and support dies and he runs around unconcerned. If you go to commiserate he turns his head and walks away. I still have not seen a man like him. See me, I lost a watch sometime back, I still lose my sleep thinking about it. Kattamashai, I find it equally hard to understand you. For how long will you go on playing around with wax like a child? Isn't it time that you gave some thought to the hereafter?'

Giving Kattamashai a chance to think of his hereafter, Vatuk Maiti leaves. But Kattamashai finds himself incapable of any such thought.

Chatturjay comes into the room one day saying, 'We shall take tea with some ceremony to day.'

He sits with the tray on the small teapoy. He gives Shyam instruc-

tions about the making. Kattamashai hears tea being poured from the pot to the cup. Then silence. Kattamashai breaks the silence first. He says, 'Chatturjay, I am rather hurt by your behaviour.'

'What is the matter?'

'Why did you not give me the news of your great misfortune, of a few days back?'

'How did this news reach you? I am sure it is Vatuk Maiti's work. What was the point in making you unhappy? And if you are talking of sharing one's grief, will anyone's commiseration lighten the loss of a son? Katta, you should know this. In matters of deep distress we have to look for comfort only to ourselves. On such occasions even one's wife or son cannot be of help.'

The spoon moves in the cup. There is a tinkling sound. Offering the cup to Kattamashai, Chatturjay says, 'Here, take your tea. Shall I tell you what the matter really is? It is like in the old saying, your wife cooks you a peppery soup but you are obliged to say it is sweet-and-sour.[11] Your position and mine are of that sort. Tears gushing out of our eyes and nose, but we are obliged to chant, *God is merciful.*

'If we can effect a change in our values or whatever you call it, then what is hot and what is sweet may seem similar. But are we able to do it? It came to me naturally to feed and clothe my son but I never foresaw I would have to parcel *pindas* to him in heaven. That is why I freeze at the thought of arranging for his *shraddha.* Anyway, give me your cup, let me give you some tea. Your cups are no more as clean as they used to be.'

'I have noticed that too.'

'We will talk about that later. You take your tea now and let me take your leave.'

Chatturjay gets up suddenly and leaves.

A sadhu has come to the neighbourhood. News of this floats down the wind to Kattamashai's ears. But he pays it no attention. His days pass as before, modelling wax.

One evening he is sitting alone in his room running his fingers over a large lump of wax. He sees vividly that a cat has got into that

lump. But he is not able to lay hands on it. This tussle with the lump keeps him distraught. Then all at once, he gets a grip on its tail. It can't escape now. With great satisfaction he pulls out the cat's limbs, head, shoulder and all the rest. Then he starts looking for its ears. At that moment his concentration is disturbed. He feels there is somebody there by his side. He asks, 'Who is there?' 'Your Chatturjay,' comes the answer. 'Sadhu-ji has come to see how you make your figures. He is sitting just in front of you.'

Kattamashai: 'How is it that all this escaped my notice?'

Chatturjay: 'We came and sat when you were locked in your struggle with the wax lump. Now, let me introduce you to Sadhu-baba.'

Sadhu-baba: 'We have been already introduced, baba-ji. I just came to see how you make your figures. I can see it is a real mortal combat.'

Kattamashai: 'You are right. It is almost a life and death struggle. The wax has everything in it but drawing that out taxes all my strength. It would have been nice if I had recourse to some power of spells and magic to do this.'

Sadhu-baba laughs aloud and says, 'You surely do all this with the help of some such power!'

In the meantime Chatturjay has got the old wax figures from the shelf and set them before Sadhu-ji.

Sadhu-ji: 'You have created here a new world of your own. May your use of the power that has given rise to all these go unimpeded, this is my benediction.'

Kattamashai wants to hear a moral tract or two. But Sadhu-baba will not oblige. He confines himself to asking questions about the wax figures. In the course of the conversation Kattamashai extends his hand over the table. Immediately Chatturjay picks up a matchbox and says, 'Take this.' Kattamashai withdraws his hand quickly and says, 'Let it be.'

Sadhu-baba: 'Baba-ji, do smoke if you want to.'

Kattamashai: 'No, sadhu-ji, I have already given enough reason for offence. I haven't even done *pranam* to you.'

Sadhu-baba: '*Pranam* can wait. Let me ask you something. If Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwara[12] appear in your room one day and

say, "Your seat is ready, come with us," what will your answer be?'

Kattamashai: 'That is an astonishing question. Why would Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwara come, in the first instance?'

Sadhu-baba: 'The question is, if they do. If Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwara come and ask you this, what will you do? What answer will you give?'

Kattamashai was still at a loss for a reply.

Sadhu-baba: 'You will say, "Oh Brahma, Vishnu and Maheswara, just wait a little while. Let me finish the work at hand. Then I shall see.'"

Saying these words he breaks out into loud laughter.

Chatturjay (to Kattamashai): 'I have put your figures back in their places. The cigarettes and the matches are in front of you.'

Sadhu-baba: 'Baba-ji, we will leave you at this.'

Soon after, Sadhu-baba and Chatturjay leave the room on quick feet.

Hearing that Kattamashai had wanted to meet Sadhu-baba another time, Chatturjay says, 'Good, come along, let us go and have his *darshan.'* Kattamashai is unwilling to move out of his chair. But Chatturjay will hear none of his excuses. He says, 'What good will such inactivity do you? Since you have harboured such a wish, we should go. There is also the question of propriety. When a sadhu has paid you a visit it is only proper that you should visit him in return.'

Changing his dhoti and shirt, and taking his stick in hand, Kattamashai goes with Chatturjay to see the sadhu. Kattamashai soon feels he has walked a lot. Surely Chatturjay's house is not that far! Chatturjay says, 'It is just that you are out of practice. I am taking the right way.'

Kattamashai comes to know that Chatturjay is not taking him to his house. So he asks, 'Where are you taking me?'

'You see, Sadhu-baba has gone away, so I have brought you out a little to take the air. Being out in this evening air is no less edifying than visiting a sadhu.'

On the way back Chatturjay says, 'Katta, there are countless stars in the sky, this evening. The way they twinkle in the dark sky is very beautiful to see. Tell me, are there no stars in your sky?'

Katta: 'No, my sky has no stars. It is impenetrably dark.'

Chatturjay: 'Keep the search on. Maybe one day you will discover a pole star in that sky.'

Chatturjay brings Kattamashai to his sitting room and gives him a chair. He puts a glass in his hand saying, 'Hold it well, I will give you a spot of whisky, a small peg for you, a double for me.'

The two sip their drinks slowly. Chatturjay is silent. Then he suddenly breaks the ice and says, 'If you won't get upset, I'll tell you something. Maybe you do not know, the line of your Shyam's moustache is now emerging clear and in your neighbour's house there is now a fawn-eyed maid, whose immodesty is disarmingly attractive. So you may look forward to some breach of peace in your house. If you key up your olfactory nerves you will also notice that Shyam's hair now exudes the smell of perfumed oil and, in the same proportion, your cups, glasses and spoons reek of onions, garlic and meat.' When Chatturjay reached Kattamashai back Shyam was not at home. But when he did come there was a sharp smell of perfume. But Chatturjay held Kattamashai back from giving him a scolding.

Before Kattamashai can do anything following Chatturjay's warning, the wind of youth enters his household and starts upsetting its ordered life system.

Slowly Kattamashai notices how uncontrollable Shyam has become. Here was a new crisis. But he also notices with surprise that all this disorder does not really disturb him. He calls to mind the old days—when he was rocked about by a more fearful storm. Then his inside was really upset though his outside seemed calm. Now there is disorder outside, but his inside is quite composed.

In a flash Sadhu-baba's words come to his mind. Not to stop working with his hands even if Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwara come and stand before him. Today his meaning seems clear. After finishing his son's *shraddha* Chatturjay comes to see Kattamashai. Entering the room he says, 'Katta, now I am going away on a pilgrimage.'

From his words it sounded as if his wife wanted to go and stay in a holy place. And Chatturjay was going to be by her side. 'Let this not disturb you,' Chatturjay adds, 'I have told Jaladhar, he will give you

company. He is a nice person.'

Kattamashai speaks out with some bitterness, 'What kind of joke is this? I shudder at the thought of Jaladhar's company. Premature old man, only talks about himself. And gives a long list of all the ailments on the earth.'

'No, no, Jaladhar is a good person. His mind is without blemish. You just have to change a few of your habits, that is all.'

'Now, in my old age, I can't change my habits for the sake of Jaladhar!'

'Ah! Why do you get so excited? How many of our conflicts are between man and man? All the frictions are between habit and habit. In this regard, even Shyam has taught you many things. Let me take your leave now, Kattamashai, it is fruitless to lengthen this discussion. And let me take one of your wax figures. Maybe from it I will learn a way to self-realization.'

'Take back your words, Chatturjay. I have no presumptions of being a teacher. I have no illusions on that account.'

For a moment Kattamashai thinks Chatturjay is leaving the room. The next moment he feels he is still there. Kattamashai asks, 'Chatturjay, have you not left yet?'

Chatturjay: 'I see your hair has turned white like *dhatura* flowers.'

Kattamashai: 'All my hair?'

Chatturjay: 'Yes; pure spotless white. All right now, goodbye. I don't see much point in our writing to each other. Some day you will hear that I am dead, or I will hear you are. The one who hears this first will grieve. So it is better not to get any news at all.'

PART II

Many years have passed in the meantime; one season has followed another. Kattamashai feels the passage of the years. He hears people discussing years and dates. With the passage of time the surroundings too undergo a change. Shyam has been called away by his father to be married. Though he still comes and shows his face once in a way. Now his chest, arms and legs are as hard as iron. He talks to Kattamashai

about the wax figures. He handles some of them.

'Do you still make any toys ?' Kattamashai asks him.

'No, babu, I don't get any time. There is a lot of work to do.'

There were two pieces of his making on the shelf. He looks at them. 'Take your pieces with you. Show them to your wife.'

'No babu, they don't fancy all this.'

A long time ago, Shyam had come to this house, soft like wax in mind and body. Now his mind is hardening, like his body already has. Kattamashai muses, 'Mother Nature is fashioning another fossil with her hands.'

He is still in the same seat of darkness he had landed on after being spun around on that whirlwind of a summer noon. He is still sitting in the same chair.

A long time has passed. Even though in Kattamashai 's calendar the years and dates are not marked too distinctly, he can infer this from the testimony of the chair's worn-out polish, the frayed stitches of the cushions, the rusted hinges of its arms and legs.

In the garden a wild, large-leaved tree has grown entwined with the mango tree, almost covered it up; Kattamashai can't run his fingers along the mango tree easily anymore. The path in front of the house is so overgrown with grass that it has become one with the ground beside it. And in the evening, from time to time, one hears the sound of crickets.

Most of the people who knew Kattamashai are no more. Sounds of new feet, new voices, a strange clamour whirls around him. In the midst of it he sits lonely and still. Those who sing the paean of the new have no interest in Kattamashai. Nor can Kattamashai be part of their hullabaloo. Between them lies too large a chasm of time.

Jaladhar still comes and goes. He is suffering from an incurable illness. He tries to ignore it. He says, 'Kattamashai I am here today, I may not be here tomorrow. I haven't still found someone to keep you company'

Searching around for such a person Jaladhar got his final release one day. With his passing away, Kattamashai's past history also came to an end.

The the last rains of Sravan. The downpour is unceasing. Its sound wipes out all other sounds. From early morning Kattamashai wonders when Keshto will come. When he will get a little tea. In the pouring rain Keshto does not come. How late was it? What time would it be? All Kattamashai's devices to figure out time fail. He has at times figured it out by counting the smoked stubs of his cigarettes. But today he has no cigarettes and that way is closed.

He walks around a little, in the room. Knocking his stick on the floor Kattamashai ponders, when will Keshto come? Then at this moment of crisis, he devises a way to while away time. He takes matchsticks out of the matchbox and scatters them on the table top. Then he counts them and puts them back in the box. Again he takes them out and scatters them. Again he puts them back into the box. His body signals from time to time that it is time for tea. And he hasn't had a smoke yet. He feels the pang of hunger. It is certainly very late. Why hasn't Keshto turned up yet? Just then there is a rustling sound. It is the post. The postman tells him it is nearly one o'clock. The rain has slackened a little. Sounds become distinct. He notices the difference between the sound rain makes on banana trees and the sound it makes on the *jamun's* thick foliage.

To gauge how heavy the rain is Kattamashai crumples a piece of newspaper and throws it out of the window. The rain makes a novel kind of sound on the paper, very different from that on the banana leaves. But the sound does not last. He can guess that the paper has become soggy and disintegrated. The force of rain hasn't lessened yet. From the house opposite he can hear sounds. The rain should have become lighter. There is a loud bang on the door and then Keshto's voice. Opening the door and crossing the room into the kitchen Keshto says, 'Babu, disaster! The land is sinking. It is flood and famine, there is no way out!'

Keshto is Kattamashai's new servant. He has, at all times, a transistor hanging from his shoulder. But it has no battery. Keshto is a news maniac. As soon as it is time for news broadcasts he leaves his work and bolts from the house. Today too he finishes his work somehow and says, 'Babu, it's terrible news today, I am off.'

As soon as Keshto left the rain started to fall in torrents. He hears Keshto's final words, 'Fused! Fused! Everything has gone dark! The whole world is dark!'

Kattamashai is used to staying alone in the dark. But his mind is disturbed to know that there is no light anywhere. In a while fears of all shapes and sizes mushroom on the darkness. Fear—but he is unable to comprehend of what. All kinds of thoughts come to mind. He is able to brush them off as imaginary in no time, but he is still in the grip of fear. And with a sudden jolt as one experiences at the fall of a thunderbolt near by, he experiences the fear of death. All is dark. But the blackness is patched over here and there by a faded, soiled fear.

Who hasn't ever thought of death? In age after age man has tried to conceive of death but no one has been able to capture its reality. The pictures of death presented at different times have been different but one thing has remained constant. That death is all powerful. This, men have tried to embody in form and gesture, in art and poetry. Kattamashai realized that it would be lunacy for him, a decrepit old man, to confront such an all-powerful adversary.

If on this stormy night death attacks him, no one will hear the sound. The thought that he could die without anyone knowing it augments his fear. Suppose death totters in like a drunk and locks him in his arms? Or a gigantic python whips its coils around him, feet upward? What will he do?

With the fear of death his usual instincts sharpen. He feels a sharp need to eat and go to bed. Maybe if he eats and gets under the cover of the mosquito net the fear will pass. He stands in the middle of the room petrified by the fear, unable to move in any direction. Who knows what is in front and how and when it will assail him? What will he do if a bunch of scorpions crawls up his body from his plate? What time is it? There is no way of knowing whether the lights are on in all the rooms. Screwing up his courage, stick in hand, Kattamashai enters the bedroom. He stands and hesitates before the mosquito net. As he gets under it the fear lessens. But the next moment it recurs again. Should some unknown creature climb on his chest and bite his throat, he would not have time enough to make a sound! Under the pressure

of these misgivings, sometimes heavy, sometimes light, Kattamashai falls asleep.

Kattamashai's sleep is disturbed. Someone is calling him. Unthinkingly, as usual, Kattamashai asks, 'Who's there?' A voice says, 'Wake up. Sit up. I have come to keep you company. I am Fate.[13] Or the Invisible Law as some people call me, stroking their temple in awe. But today I have come to you as the Voice. To banish your fear.'

Kattamashai cannot make out whether he is awake or dreaming.

'This is no dream, Kattamashai. It is plain reality. I am here before you. I have come to find out why you were so scared. I have also something else to talk to you about.'

Kattamashai still wonders whether this is not all a thief's trick.

'This is no thief's trick, Kattamashai, this is plain fact. Fate is here beside you.'

'How do you manage to read my thoughts?'

'If I didn't, my name wouldn't be Fate.'

'Why have you come here in the middle of this night? Scared though I was, I didn't offer any flowers at your altar.'

'You need no flower and leaf for my worship. With bowed heads and bare hands skeletons ambulate round my unlighted shrine. Obedience is what I seek. Is all this news to you?'

Kattamashai: 'What use is it your repeating these old wives' tales?'

Fate: 'It looks to me as if you still have a swollen ego.'

Kattamashai: 'Man after all is your adversary. So he defies you over and over. But let us change the topic. Tell me, why have you come here today?'

Fate: 'I have come to forewarn you. To get ready to go with me.'

Kattamashai: 'But I won't budge now, whoever you are. I have lots of things to do.'

Fate: 'May I know what sort of things?'

Kattamashai: 'I am now engaged in the act of timeless creation. That takes a lot of time.'

Fate: 'You are engaged in timeless creation! For that you need a different kind of temperament. Those engaged in such creation do

not waste their time sighing and counting matchsticks. Or craving for tea and cigarettes as you do. Nor do they get immobilized by the fear of death. If you ask me, timeless creation is not your cup of tea. On the other hand, if you follow me now you will have no trouble at Chitragupta's[14] office.'

'I own my defects but I have made up my mind. I will not go without leaving behind me timeless creations and lasting fame. But I want to know something from you, how did I get so nonplussed by the fear of death? I don't get easily frightened of anything. I am used to being alone. And darkness is the daylight of my world.'

'It is people who want to keep going for all time like you, that get nonplussed by the fear of death. Those who are engaged in timeless creation work face to face with death. This is a hard job, Kattamashai. This is why I advise you to get ready to go with me.'

'However hard it may be, I will overcome every obstacle. I just want some more time from you.'

'You can do a lot with fame and power, health and wealth, youth and friendship. So think again.'

'I am speaking to you after due thought.'

'From the way you think I can say that timeless creation is not your job. Besides, what provision will you make for your hungry stomach? You will need bread and water. You will need shelter. To work you will need to hold your backbone straight. With these rusted joints of your arms and legs what timeless creation can there be? All the same, I do not doubt your sincerity. So I shall give you some glimpses into timeless creation before I go. Follow me.'

Kattamashai sees before him a flow that has no beginning or end. On its banks are villages and towns, woods and orchards, children playing on meadows of green grass, men and women in the various acts of life. Then they get washed away by the stream. Now appear new scenes, a new babel of voices, the sound of helpless weeping, floral cascades of laughter. At each bend of the stream stand the monumental achievements of people who have triumphed over time. But all those who claim immortality are unable to save themselves from the flow. The

New advances, wiping out the Old, annihilating joyfully what is forsworn to die. But men lift their arms above the stream to save their petty memories. Behind crumbling temples and monasteries, new ones are rising up—but nothing is permanent, only some last a little longer than the others.

There seems to be no dividing line between sky and water. Whirlpools of various sizes spiral out conch-like, it seems as if the constellations are exploding on the earth. The spray splashes around like stars. But in the sky there are no signs of sound, speed or dispersal.

From the depths of space a great voice booms, sounding like a thunderbolt on an autumn noon.

An echo reverberates: No, no.

'Do you see Kattamashai, the path of timeless creation?'

Kattamashai asks, 'Has this flow no beginning or end?'

Fate: 'One could say it has, this all-destroying flow[15] starts from where there is nothing and ends where there will be nothing. Now you start your timeless creation.

'There will be many difficulties and impediments in your way. But this object will tide you over, keep this with you.'

Saying this, Fate puts a beautiful vessel in Kattamashai's hands and disappears. Kattamashai feels round the vessel from all sides, its outside is beautifully crafted, its inside is smooth and burnished. The outside and the inside were different in many ways, though when you tapped it and it rang, these differences disappeared. But when you turned it upside down the crafted outside felt like a mountain peak. While its inside seemed a symbol of the limitless void. On one side it seemed to present a detailed image of achievement, on the other the indefinability of creation. He calls Rudranarayan to mind. He sees in an instant how they were from one point of view so dissimilar and from another, one and the same.

Kattamashai prepares himself for timeless creation. He spreads his mat. But as soon as he sits down he feels disturbed. Something is moving under his seat. The ants pester. He finds it hard to sit steady. Kattamashai thinks, 'I was all right all these days! What has Fate done

to me!' But in spite of the pestering of ants and other annoyances he holds fast to his seat in the end. And the discomforts and vexations vanish in no time.

Now his fingers turn out wax figures one after another. Their unexpected and unforeseen forms astonish Kattamashai. All these days the figures he made had the imprint of his ego. But now his sheer existence seemed to find expression through these lumps of wax.

Kattamashai thinks, 'How delightful, I never got this before.' He has forgotten all about his struggle for life or his fear of death. He has given expression to the flux of time. So he knows that whether his figure be of wax or of iron, it won't last. But would this delight, this experience, also pass? So there is an undercurrent of sadness in his delight. The flow of time fades from view, leaving behind a resounding cry of pain. Will everything else pass and this cry alone survive? There is a mark of this delight on the wax figures. Running his hands over these he wonders, 'Will the man who leaves such a mark, sacrificing his all, also pass?' Maybe everything will be swept away, except this intense experience. This is the timeless reality of the life-vessel and its name is creation.

A murmur of fame comes to Kattamashai's ears. From time to time it swells to the sound of a gong. He ignores these as trivial. But the bands of admirers who break into his room uninvited don't give him peace. They handle his wax figures without ceremony and ask, 'Why is there no pedestal? And no accession number? How can one then assess their worth?'

They want to find out how solid Kattamashai's stock of knowledge is. Kattamashai says it is empty. They are astonished to hear that Kattamashai hasn't read anything, doesn't know anything. They ask, 'How, then, does he make these figures?' One band follows another. The same question is put again. 'What do all these figures mean? What purpose do they serve?' Gradually Kattamashai gets irritated. Although the names of gods and deities don't come easily to his lips he exclaims in his helplessness, 'Oh Brahma, Vishnu, and Maheshwara! Where are you all? Come and save me!'

Sitting on his chair, with a wax figure in one hand, a cigarette in another and a cup of tea in between, he goes on repeating this prayer. He says, 'I can't stand it any more.' The room gets hot and humid with the crowd of men. The smell is oppressive. It is insufferable.

One day a big crowd has collected in the room. Kattamashai is torn asunder by a volley of questions. Why is he making things that answered none of the world's problems, they ask and they want his answer. Kattamashai is thinking of an answer, when the unexpected happens. From somewhere a voice booms out: 'Get out!' After a pause it booms again: 'Get out of here!' In a stampede, the admirers run helter-skelter. And the room falls empty. Now he hears a strange voice say, 'Do you understand now how to solve a problem?' Kattamashai asks, 'Who are you Sir, who have saved me from this dire predicament?' 'I am the parrot of Mother Saraswati, the Goddess of Learning. Seeing you in distress she sent me to your rescue. Now make this your mantra. If you go on chanting it no one will dare cross the threshold of your room, leave alone the threshold of your mind.'

'Can I for once feel your divine body?'

The parrot ambles around on the table and says. 'You may, but don't press me too hard. Or I will bite.'

Then it adds, 'Now, that you have seen me, I take your leave. But don't forget the mantra.' And it flies away. Kattamashai learns this mantra of Mother Saraswati by heart.

There are no more distractions in the way of Kattamashai's work. He goes on working, he goes on making his wax figures. No one crosses the doorstep of his room. Though some hang around the threshold of the mind. The potent mantra never fails him.

When one morning, dressed and ready, Kattamashai was sitting down to make his figures, two personages came and stood before him. Addressing him they said, 'We are Timeless Creation and Immortal Fame. Ask us for a boon.' But before he can think of what boon to ask, his tongue lets go, 'Get out!' Then Kattamashai laments. 'Alas! What have I done? I have ruined the gains of a whole lifetime's effort! I have turned away Timeless Creation and Immortal Fame with such scant