

Evam Indrajit

Badal Sircar

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NEW DRAMA IN INDIA



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Badal Sircar

EVAM INDRAJIT

Translated by

Girish Karnad

CALCUTTA

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Badal **SIRCAR** 1925

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INTRODUCTION

WRITING about Badal Sircar's *Evam Indrajit* (literally, 'and Indrajit') is like going on a sentimental journey; a nostalgic foray into the recent past of the Indian theatre; an encounter with the bitter-sweet memories of a struggling sensibility trying to strike roots in a barren land; because, after all, it is only in relation to Indian theatre history that *Evam Indrajit* really makes its presence felt; otherwise it is just a very good, sensitively written play, like many others written in the last decade in India.

The year 1962 is important to India for many reasons. 1962 was a year of great political turmoil. But it was also the year when Dharamvir Bharati's Hindi play *Andha Yug* was performed by Theatre Unit (Bombay). *Andha Yug* was a small beginning but the seeds of creative pride had been sown and a determined effort at looking at one's surroundings was to become an imperative which went beyond the platitudinous slogan of seeking one's roots. This imperative found its first fully conscious expression the same year in Calcutta, where a lean and balding Bengali architect was fulfilling his assignment as an urban designer and also writing a play, later to be recognized as a milestone in the history of modern Indian drama. The play was *Evam Indrajit*, written in Bengali by Badal Sircar.

Immediately after Independence, the concept of a composite Indian culture had taken birth. While on one level it prodded Indian artists to compete with the best in the world and assert their Indian identity, on another level it served to instil in the mind of the artist the almost pitiable craving for a sanction from the West. The measure of omniscience and superiority granted to the cultural palate of the West was ridiculous and humiliating, but even this humiliation ultimately contributed to the idea of a composite Indian culture.

In the theatre, the Indian People's Theatre Association (the cultural front of the Communist Party of India) had been very active in the pre-Independence era. But some of its political decisions in the late forties led to the disillusionment of many creative

talents hitherto associated with the IPTA. With the coming of Independence, the IPTA lost its hold on many of its stalwarts. One of the major breakaways was Sombhu Mitra who was primarily responsible for major developments in the theatre in the early fifties. His production of Tagore's *Raktakarabi* in 1954 and his adaptations of Ibsen's plays shaped the future of the 'minority' theatre in India, and Indian theatre of the sixties drew its inspiration directly from Mitra. The fact that he travelled all over the country with his plays helped in shaping the talent of the sixties.

With the performance of Sircar's *Evam Indrajit* in Bengali in Calcutta in September 1965, theatre practitioners all over India became aware of a major talent and a major play. The play provided for them the shock of recognition. It was about the Indian reality as they knew it; it was a theatrically effective and crystallized projection of all the prevalent attitudes, vague feelings and undefined frustrations gnawing at the hearts of the educated urban middle class.

The intellectually alive urban middle class regards itself as the backbone of the country. Their so-called middle class values have been glorified and yet their genuine and deeper values have always been attacked by those who swear by fashionable Marxist dogmas. The middle classes have been made to feel guilty for opting for stability, aspiring for culture and believing in a national identity. In Bengal, the contradiction was resolved at a certain level with the middle classes aligning themselves with the left forces. In other parts of the country, the best elements in the middle classes were opting for the armed forces or the administrative services. *Evam Indrajit* is in some ways about the residue; the residue consists of those who have failed to adjust, align, and ceased to aspire, and also those who are enmeshed in the day to day struggle for survival.

□ The play starts with the Writer in search of a play. As he furiously tears up his manuscripts, his inspiration appears as a woman whom Sircar calls Manasi—'the creation of the mind' and perhaps an Indian counterpart of Jung's *anima*. The Writer's

dilemma is related to what he considers the limitedness of his experience. He does not know 'people', he has not experienced life at its primitive and basic reality; and he is goaded to write only about those who at that moment are sitting in the auditorium (incidentally, the middle classes in Calcutta and Bombay are known for their addiction to theatre in spite of the inroads it makes into their budget). The Writer finds them undramatic (Sircar hitting at the traditional concept of the dramatic in relation to subject matter). Meanwhile The Mother, eternal and typical, keeps popping in to deliver her homilies. There is a totally bewildered incomprehension on her part of The Writer's need to write at the cost of neglecting important human functions like eating and sleeping. Throughout the play we shall find The Mother and Manasi counterpointing each other.

The Writer suddenly turns towards the audience and calls out to four latecomers and asks them to come on-stage. As the four give their names, The Writer does not accept the name of the fourth. The fourth ultimately confesses to having shied away from giving his real name. He is not Nirmal, but Indrajit (the name of the mythical rebel Meghnad who defeated Indra, the Indian Zeus). Fear prompted him to practise this minor deception—the fear of the consequence of deviating from the social code (its rules are never defined, but they range from social inhibitions to deep-rooted social taboos). From this point in the play The Writer takes over like an ubiquitous and omniscient presence, probing the lives of Amal, Vimal, Kamal and Indrajit.

The humdrum existence of Amal, Vimal and Kamal is made theatrically captivating, and we laugh at them, sympathize with the monotony of their existence, and then like Indrajit (because everybody in the audience identifies himself with Indrajit), start aspiring for a life harnessed to definite worries and cares because the 'anguish' of being aware has become an impossible burden.

The yearnings and dissatisfactions of an adolescent Indrajit or his insistence on an existence beyond geography, are feelings that the educated middle class mind has known often. His love for Manasi, the taboo attached to it (she is his first cousin on the

mother's side), his wanting to break the taboo and failing to accomplish it, his anger at the state of affairs and his total inability to do anything are again common experiences in India. His failure to fulfil his love makes him see his own existence through the wrong end of the microscope. He finds our mean little world ridiculous because it can be blown up by the flick of a switch, because it is so small when placed against the vastness of the cosmos. Then comes a stage when he realizes that even the fulfilment of his love would not have provided the answer. A visit to London (a onetime Mecca for Indians) proves disappointing. He contemplates suicide as an act of faith, but finds himself incapable of the act.

At this point Sircar suddenly changes 'scale' (a feat in which he is very accomplished and which he employs as his major technique throughout), with Manasi intruding upon Indrajit's cogitation to ask him to eat some food—which has been the function of The Mother so long. The Writer feels betrayed, and Manasi is shocked at what she has said, and reverts to her original role to ask, 'Have you written anything yet?'

The Writer insists that Indrajit does not have a core, a commitment; he is too elusive to be contained within the structural framework of the play, because he denies reality and questions its very base. But Manasi insists that Indrajit is good material because he can still dream, and it does not matter whether his dreams accomplish anything or not. The Writer asks her, 'But how do you know?' Manasi does not know, she only believes, and that is all she can do.

The Writer asks himself: Belief? In What? Belief in *pataal*, in the Nether World, in the circle for condemned souls? At this point a bolder shift in scale is effected with the entrance of Indrajit, slightly cynical and married to a giggling wife. She is also introduced as Manasi, because Indrajit has concluded that distinctive individual qualities are a fiction of the mind.

But the real Manasi is still there at the same old place. Indrajit still meets her from time to time, but it is no longer the same. For Indrajit finds himself looking at parallel railway tracks on either

side—tracks with an illusory meeting point: the train does not come on these tracks any more; if it had, it could have provided an opportunity of total surrender and release from human bondage. He does not believe in his dreams any more, for he has now come to the bitter awareness that they were just dreams dreamt by a person who thought that he had the potential but in fact is a very ordinary person—he is Nirmal.

The scenes with the real Manasi, in terms of real time, have taken place in the past. But Sircar's fondness for Indrajit and what he stands for forces him to indulge in a sleight of hand: and in terms of theatrical presentation Indrajit is taken out of a vivid emotional past (the last scene with the real Manasi) straight into a sort of limbo, a no man's land in unreal time, for a final confrontation with The Writer.

The Writer now asserts his belief in a travel towards no defined goal, knowing for certain that the road is meaningless, the journey futile and irrational. Indrajit is quick to see the Sisyphus analogy, and the play ends with an assertion that goes beyond logic and reaches out to us like a cry for help from a drowning man with a sense of the essential and inescapable sadness of life. A political commitment on the part of Indrajit would not have shaped his destiny differently; it would have only dissipated his complexity because Indrajit is the eternal question mark, and he still seeks an answer.

Structurally Sircar anticipates and captures the hybridization of the period; for the complexity of Indrajit's situation is such that stylistic punctiliousness must give precedence to what needs to be expressed with uncompromising honesty.

When Indrajit unwittingly emerges almost a decade later, as a character in Satyajit Ray's *Pratidwandi*, then in spite of his real 'feel' in cinema, one finds that his wings have been clipped. An Indrajit so totally circumscribed by the realism of cinema never achieves the evocative richness of his original theatrical framework.

SATYADEV DUBEY

EVAM INDRAJIT was first presented in English by the Madras Players at the Museum Theatre, Madras in April 1970. It was directed by Girish Karnad and Ammu Matthew, with decor by Vishalam Ekambaram, music by K. S. Narayanan and lights by S. V. Krishnamurty and Adi Dalal. The cast was as follows:

THE WRITER	Bruno Castelino
AUNTIE	Yamuna Prabhu/Lakshmi Krishnamurty
MANASI	Bhagirathi Narayanan
AMAL	S. Gopalic
VIMAL	Ambi Harsha
KAMAL	A. C. Krishna Kumar
INDRAJIT	A. V. Dhanushkodi

ACT ONE

A table with a huge pile of papers on it. Sitting on the chair in front of it is the Writer, his back to the audience. He is writing. Perhaps he has been writing for some time.

'Auntie' enters. She is called 'auntie' here only for convenience. She could be 'mother', 'elder sister', anything. She is frantic because she can't make any sense of her boy's behaviour. But then, not being able to make sense is the prerogative of 'aunties'.

AUNTIE. I just can't understand you!

[No response from the Writer.]

I'm asking you. . . are you coming in to eat or aren't you? You are the limit! I can't put up with this any longer. . .

[No response.]

Why don't you speak?

WRITER. I'll have finished in a moment.

AUNTIE. You have already said that three times—I am *not* going to call you again.

WRITER. You have said that three times too, Auntie.

AUNTIE. Do what you want. Night and day—scribble, scribble, scribble. No food, no drink, just scribble. Only God knows what will come out of all this scribbling. . .

[She goes out grumbling. The 'scribbling' has of course come to a stop already. The Writer gets up and walks downstage reading what he has written so far. A girl comes in. She will be called 'Manasi'.]

MANASI. Finished?

WRITER. No.

MANASI. Won't you read out what you have written so far?

WRITER. Haven't written a thing.

[Tears up the papers.]

MANASI. Why did you do that?

WRITER. It's no good. I have nothing to write about.

MANASI. Nothing?

WRITER. What shall I write? Who shall I write about? How many people do I know? And what do I know about them?

MANASI. [*Pointing to the audience.*] There are all these people. Don't you know any of them? Don't you know anything about any one of them?

WRITER. Them? Oh yes. I do know a couple of them. A few like us. But they won't make a play.

MANASI. Try.

WRITER. I have tried.

[He throws away the bits of paper and goes back to the table. After a brief pause Manasi goes out. The Writer turns round suddenly and advances towards the audience. At exactly this moment four gentlemen are looking for their seats in the auditorium. The Writer calls out to them.]

Listen. . . My dear sir. . . You there. . .

FIRST MAN. Eh! Are you addressing us?

WRITER. Yes, please. Would you mind stepping over here for a moment?

SECOND. All of us?

THIRD. On stage?

WRITER. Yes, if you don't mind. There's some important work.

[The four advance towards the stage.]

FIRST. How do we get on there?

WRITER. This way. . . Here. Up these steps.

[The four go up.]

WRITER. May I know your name?

FIRST. Amal Kumar Bose.

WRITER. And. . . yours, please?

SECOND. Vimal Kumar Ghosh.

[The Writer turns to the third man.]

THIRD. Kamal Kumar Sen.

WRITER. And. . . ?

FOURTH. Nirmal Kumar. . .

WRITER. [*Suddenly shouts.*] No. . . It can't be!

[Silence. The four look at him in surprise, and freeze.]

Amal, Vimal, Kamal and Nirmal? No, it can't be. You must have another name. You have to have. Tell me truly, what's your name?

[*The stage is plunged into darkness. Amal, Vimal and Kamal withdraw leaving the fourth man centre-stage. The Writer's voice is heard in the dark.*]

What's your name?

FOURTH. Indrajit Ray.

WRITER. Then why did you call yourself Nirmal?

INDRAJIT. I was scared.

WRITER. Scared? Of what?

INDRAJIT. Scared of unrest. One invites unrest by breaking the norm.

WRITER. Have you always called yourself Nirmal?

INDRAJIT. No, but I do now.

WRITER. Why?

INDRAJIT. I'm older now. Age is afraid of joy, of happiness. It only wants comfort. Peace. Now Indrajit only wants the comfort of a dark, cloudy sky.

WRITER. How old are you?

INDRAJIT. A hundred. May be two hundred. I don't know. According to the Matriculation Certificate, thirty-five.

WRITER. Where were you born?

INDRAJIT. In Calcutta.

WRITER. Education?

INDRAJIT. In Calcutta.

WRITER. Work?

INDRAJIT. In Calcutta.

WRITER. Marriage?

INDRAJIT. In Calcutta.

WRITER. Death?

INDRAJIT. Not dead yet.

WRITER. Are you sure?

INDRAJIT. [*After a long pause.*] No, I'm not sure.

[*The stage lights up slowly, but not fully. The four stand like statues staring at the rear wall of the auditorium. The Writer turns to the audience, looks at them and then speaks in the tone of a tired teacher.*]

WRITER. According to the census of 1961, the population of Calcutta is 2,92,12,891. Of them about two and a half

per cent are graduates. They are known by different names. They are the middle-income group, although within that group there is enough disparity of income. They are the intellectuals, although if they really relied on their intellect, they would die of starvation. They are the educated minority, if a degree is indeed a mark of education. They are the élite, because they are well aware of their difference from the rest. They are Amal, Vimal, Kamal.

[*The three go out.*]

And Indrajit.

[*Indrajit looks at the Writer and goes out. There is anguish in his eyes, exhaustion in his movements.*]

It's possible that there is drama in their lives. Enough drama to make short scenes—any number of them. It's even possible that one day a great playwright will make a play out of them.

AUNTIE. [*Enters.*] Aren't you going to eat tonight?

WRITER. No.

[*Auntie goes out. Manasi comes in.*]

MANASI. Written anything?

WRITER. No.

[*Manasi goes out.*]

I've written many plays. I want to write many more. But . . . I know nothing about the suffering masses. Nothing about the toiling peasants. Nothing about the sweating coal-miners. Nothing about the snake-charmers, the tribal chieftains or the boatmen. There is no beauty in the people around me, no splendour, no substance. Only the undramatic material—Amal, Vimal, Kamal and Indrajit.

[*Slow darkness on the stage.*]

I am. . . Amal, Vimal, Kamal and Indrajit.

[*A chorus of voices whispers in the dark.*]

VOICES. Amal, Vimal, Kamal and Indrajit.

Vimal, Kamal and Indrajit.

Kamal and Indrajit.

And Indrajit.

Indrajit.

Indrajit.

Indrajit.

[Suddenly loud music drowns the voices. White, shadowless glare on the stage. The stage is empty. The music stops suddenly. A college bell rings. Indrajit comes in. His movements are those of a man much younger than thirty-five, though there is no special make-up on his face. He is followed by Amal, who looks serious as befits a Professor. Amal, Vimal and Kamal take on appropriate voices and gestures although there is a hint of puppet-show in their movements.]

AMAL. Roll Number Thirty-four!

INDRAJIT. Yes, Sir.

AMAL. Every body continues in its state of rest or of uniform motion in a straight line unless it is compelled by an external impressed force to change that state.

[The bell rings. Amal goes out. Indrajit stands up. Vimal enters.]

VIMAL. Roll Number Thirty-four!

INDRAJIT. Yes, Sir.

VIMAL. Poetry, in a general sense, may be defined to be 'the expression of imagination'.

[The bell again. Exit Vimal, Kamal enters.]

KAMAL. Roll Number Thirty-four!

INDRAJIT. Yes, Sir.

KAMAL. The fundamental elements of the essay are logical development, expressive language, lucidity of thought and a balanced combination of theory and facts.

[The bell. Exit Kamal.]

INDRAJIT. A balanced combination of theory and facts. A balanced combination of theory and facts. Expression of the imagination. Expression of the imagination. State of rest or of uniform motion. State of rest or of uniform motion. State of rest or of uniform motion.

[Amal, Vimal, Kamal come in noisily and surround Indrajit. They are all young now.]

AMAL. Not a cricketer? Just because he was out for two you don't call him a cricketer?

VIMAL. But is that the way to bat? What the hell is he going to

do in the Second Test?

KAMAL. But look, cricket is a game of glorious uncertainty. What do you say, Indrajit?

INDRAJIT. True enough.

AMAL. You mean there is no skill in it? What are you saying?

INDRAJIT. But who's saying that?

VIMAL. I don't care what you say, but cricket isn't half as exciting as football.

INDRAJIT. That's true.

KAMAL. But then, Texas style films are exciting. So why see good films?

VIMAL. Amal, have you seen any film of Yul Brynner?

AMAL. Every one of them! Brother, can he act! You know you can praise Marlon Brando as much as you like. But he isn't a patch on Yul Brynner. Have you seen them, Indrajit?

INDRAJIT. A couple!

KAMAL. Oh, go on. . . . That skin-head!

AMAL. Yes, yes, but it's because he has such a marvellous head that he can keep it skinned.

VIMAL. But a 'marvellous head' means something quite different!

KAMAL. Einstein's head, for instance.

INDRAJIT. The other day I saw a book on Einstein's theory. Couldn't understand a word.

AMAL. Einstein says there are four dimensions, not just three.

VIMAL. And the fourth dimension is Time. Right?

KAMAL. Search me! I can't even understand college physics! That reminds me, Amal, is your practical book ready?

AMAL. I have got my brother's book. Will just have to copy that. What's the date of submission?

VIMAL. Thirteenth, I think. I haven't even started yet. And how far have you got, Indrajit?

INDRAJIT. I started again yesterday. The first time I started I found an excellent book to read and couldn't put it down—

KAMAL. Which one?

INDRAJIT. *The Complete Plays of Bernard Shaw.*

AMAL. Shaw! Oh, he is fantastic! A real whip, I tell you. Have you read *Man and Superman*?

VIMAL. I've only read the *Plays Pleasant*.

KAMAL. You know, our Pramatha Nath Bishi has also started writing plays like Shaw?

AMAL. Come on! Where's G.B.S. and where's P.N.B.?

VIMAL. Bishi loads his plays with politics.

KAMAL. And why not? There'll always be politics in literature. There should be!

AMAL. Come, come. Literature should embody all that's true, good and beautiful. It has nothing to do with politics. Politics is dirty.

VIMAL. Look, Brother, I object to 'dirty'. If Truth is dirty, ignoring it would be sheer escapism. Literature should be a reflection of life. Realistic. Don't you agree, Indrajit?

INDRAJIT. I'm not very clear actually. True, literature should be realistic. But to say it should be a naked reflection of life. . .

KAMAL. God! Do you know what time it is? Half past seven.

AMAL. Oh My God! My practical book! Come on, come on. . .

VIMAL. We are going that way.

KAMAL. Come on, Amal.

[*Amal and Kamal go out.*]

VIMAL. Aren't you coming home?

INDRAJIT. I, I've to finish some work first.

VIMAL. Where?

INDRAJIT. Just. . . [*Points after Amal and Kamal.*]

VIMAL. Then why didn't you go with them?

INDRAJIT. Didn't strike me then.

VIMAL. Well, I'll have to foot it alone now.

[*Exit Vimal. This entire dialogue has been accompanied by a slow, repetitive pattern on the tabla. Now the rhythm gets faster and more complex. The Writer enters.*]

WRITER. Hello! You still there?

INDRAJIT. Yes.

WRITER. What are you doing?

INDRAJIT. Nothing.

WRITER. Didn't they come today?

INDRAJIT. They did.

WRITER. Who?

INDRAJIT. Amal, Vimal and Kamal.

WRITER. What did you do?

INDRAJIT. Nothing. Just gossiped.

WRITER. About what?

INDRAJIT. Nothing in particular.

WRITER. Cricket, cinema, physics, politics, literature?

INDRAJIT. Eh? Yes, cricket, cinema, physics, politics and literature. How did you guess?

[*The Writer takes out a few monkey-nuts from his pocket.*]

WRITER. Have one.

INDRAJIT. What should one do, do you think?

WRITER. About what?

INDRAJIT. I'm tired of being a student.

WRITER. What do you want to do?

INDRAJIT. I don't know. Sometimes I just want to run away.

WRITER. Where to?

INDRAJIT. Don't know. Some place, you know, somewhere far away. I don't know what'll be there—jungle probably, or desert, or iceberg. Birds—penguins, ostriches. Wild animals—kangaroo, jaguar. Strange people—Bedouin, Eskimo, Maori. . . .

WRITER. In a nutshell, *The Simple School Geography*. The textbook prescribed by the D.P.I. for Standard Six.

INDRAJIT. There must be a world outside geography. It's not here. But it'll be somewhere far away—outside—beyond.

WRITER. Beyond cricket, cinema, physics, politics and literature?

INDRAJIT. Yes, beyond all that.

WRITER. Good. Let's go.

INDRAJIT. Where?

WRITER. Well, you said you wanted to go away.

INDRAJIT. Now?

WRITER. Why not?

INDRAJIT. Don't be stupid. I shouldn't have talked to you about it.

WRITER. How much do you have in your pocket?

INDRAJIT. About eight annas. Why?

WRITER. I have about a rupee and a quarter. Let's start from Howrah Station and go as far as a rupee and twelve annas will take us. After that, we can walk.

INDRAJIT. If I knew you were going to make fun of me, I wouldn't have talked to you about it.

WRITER. I am damned serious.

INDRAJIT. [*Watches the Writer for any trace of a smile. But the Writer is really serious.*] What about Mother?

WRITER. True, there is Mother.

INDRAJIT. And the exams are just round the corner.

WRITER. O.K. We'll talk about it after the exams. [*Offering him some more nuts.*] Here. There are a few left.

[*Goes out.*]

AUNTIE. [*From inside*] Indrajit . . .

INDRAJIT. I am coming.

[*But doesn't move. Auntie enters.*]

AUNTIE. Aren't you going to eat tonight? How long do you want me to wait?

INDRAJIT. Look, Mother . . .

AUNTIE. What?

INDRAJIT. Suppose . . . I have to go away . . . somewhere.

AUNTIE. I can never make any sense of what you say. Come and eat. The food is getting cold.

[*Goes out, followed by Indrajit. A chorus of voices is heard singing the following song. Slowly at first, then faster.*]

VOICES. One-two-three

One-two-three-two-one-two-three

One-two-three-two-one-two-three

Four-five-six

Four-five-six-five-four-five-six

Four-five-six-five-four-five-six

Seven-eight-nine

Seven-eight-nine-eight-seven-eight-nine

Seven-eight-nine-eight-seven-eight-nine

Nine-eight-seven-six-five-four-three-two-one

[*The Writer enters half-way through the song. At the last line of the song, he joins in with the chorus and walks down-stage.*]

WRITER. Undramatic. It's all totally undramatic. You can't make a play out of these people. It isn't possible. You there—Amal, Vimal, Kamal. . .

[*They come in giggling and surround the Writer.*]

AMAL. How are things, Poet?

WRITER. All right.

VIMAL. Any new epics?

WRITER. Nothing special.

KAMAL. Come, come, Brother, don't hide it. Afraid we will copy it? Don't worry, *baba*, we can't! We have forgotten our spelling.

[*They burst out laughing.*]

WRITER. I have written only a short poem.

AMAL. There, you see. That's more like it. All right. Let's hear it.

VIMAL. Sing, Heavenly Muse. . .

KAMAL. If we understand it, tear it up. If we don't, send it to a literary journal.

[*Laughter again.*]

WRITER. Do you want to hear it?

ALL THREE. Yes, yes, of course.

WRITER. One-two-three

One-two-three-two-one-two-three

Four-five-six

Four-five-six-five-four-five-six

Seven-eight-nine

Seven-eight-nine-eight-seven-eight-nine

AMAL. Then?

WRITER. Nine-eight-seven-six-five-four-three-two-one

VIMAL. Carry on.

WRITER. That's all.

KAMAL. That's all?

WRITER. Yes, that's all.

[*A short silence. Then the three burst out laughing.*]

AMAL. Bravo! Marvellous!

VIMAL. You are a genius!

WRITER. Did you understand that?

KAMAL. I would have in the Arithmetic Class. But this is a poem, after all. Not so easy!

[*Laughter again.*]

WRITER. Actually I want to write a play.

AMAL. And give up poetry? Just like that?

WRITER. Not just like that. I have been thinking about it for quite a while.

VIMAL. Write it. Write it down. Get hold of Bishu and ask him to produce it at the College Reunion.

KAMAL. But Bishu is so particular. Do you know Sanat Choudhury of the Fourth Year? Well, he had written a play. . . quite a good play really, but Bishu didn't like it. Said it didn't have a proper dramatic climax.

AMAL. What sort of a play do you want to write? Social?

WRITER. What do you mean—Social?

VIMAL. You don't even know what Social means? Then what are you going to write?

KAMAL. Social means—about this day and age—about our time, you know. . .

WRITER. Yes, of course, I'll write about our times.

AMAL. What's the plot?

WRITER. There isn't one.

VIMAL. I see. . . what about the theme?

WRITER. The theme? Well. . . , us!

KAMAL. Who 'Us'?

WRITER. Well, all of you, Indrajit, me. . .

AMAL. Us? Good luck to you then.

VIMAL. What drama is there in our lives, mate?

KAMAL. Look, Brother, a play about us will have no female characters in it.

[*Laughter.*]

AMAL. Don't talk nonsense, Kamal. What about that heroine in your street?

VIMAL. That's right. I had forgotten all about her. How far has that affair progressed, Kamal?

KAMAL. Brother, it isn't going beyond window-poetry. The real Romeo here is Amal. You know what happened during the last Pooja festival at Puri! Ask him. Ask him.

VIMAL. This is news to me. Amal, you've been hiding it from me. . .

AMAL. Oh, go away. . .

KAMAL. Come on now, darling boy, tell him. Tell him. Why so shy?

[The three talk in whispers. The Writer listens from a distance. Manasi crosses the stage. The three stare after her. Then talk in whispers. Then laugh. Manasi comes out again—as another girl, with a bag in her hand and a different gait. The same response. Again, Manasi enters, but dressed simply and with Indrajit. The three stare, curious and jealous. Indrajit and Manasi go out talking.]

AMAL. Did you see that?

VIMAL. Well, well! I had been wondering why our darling Indrajit was acting so strange!

KAMAL. Sinking—Sinking—Drinking water! Did you see, Poet?

WRITER. Yes.

AMAL. And what did you understand?

WRITER. The play won't be without female characters.

VIMAL. Make Indrajit the hero. We'll be the soldiers.

KAMAL. And do you know the heroine?

AMAL. How should I? Indrajit hasn't said a word about her.

VIMAL. He is very secretive.

KAMAL. He isn't secretive. . . he is just bloody vain. Thinks he is a superior being. I know that type.

AMAL. Do you know her, Poet?

WRITER. Who?

VIMAL. What's happened? Inspired? He means the heroine of your play.

WRITER. She is called Manasi.

KAMAL. There, you see, he knows her! Perhaps he has been introduced to her by Indrajit.

WRITER. No.

AMAL. Come, Poet, don't try that on us.

WRITER. Honestly, I have seen her for the first time today.

VIMAL. All right, we'll believe you. Now tell us, what has Indrajit told you about her?

WRITER. Nothing.

KAMAL. So you've seen her for the first time, Indrajit hasn't told you anything, and yet you know her name is Manasi.

WRITER. I don't know her name at all. I just felt it should be Manasi.

AMAL. Terrific! God alone knows when he is normal and when he is 'inspired'!

WRITER. What shall we call the play?

VIMAL. A title even before you write it?

KAMAL. Yes, yes, of course, one starts with the name. All right, Poet. You tell us. We know you have a real knack for christening.

WRITER. I was thinking of calling it 'Amal, Vimal, Kamal, Indrajit and Manasi'.

AMAL. No, no. That won't fit into the title-page.

VIMAL. Why do you want to shove us in? We are only the soldiers, after all!

KAMAL. Call it 'Indrajit and Manasi'. That's best! Look, we had better move. . .

AMAL. Where shall we go?

VIMAL. What about giving us some tea, Kamal?

KAMAL. O.K.

[*They go.*]

WRITER. Indrajit and Manasi. Indrajit and Manasi. [*To the audience, pontificating.*] As you all know, different conditions, different cultures, different countries have produced plays about Indrajit and Manasi. Mythical plays, histories, social plays, comedies, tragedies. . . all kinds. Hordes of Indrajits and Manasis have appeared from all levels of society, in all forms, with all possible names. . . and it's difficult to say what joys and sorrows, what meetings and partings, what pride and hatred,

what mental blows and reactions have shaped their plays. The love of Indrajit and Manasi. An immortal dramatic theme... Indrajit!

[Indrajit enters. After the Writer's rhetoric, his voice sounds flat and bored.]

INDRAJIT. What are you shouting for?

WRITER. [Theatrically.] Speak, Indrajit...

INDRAJIT. What about?

WRITER. Narrate your tale... that tale which is ever old and ever new, which started in the age of the *Mahabharata*...

INDRAJIT. Can't you put it more simply? What do you want?

WRITER. [Deflated.] Your and Manasi's story.

INDRAJIT. Manasi? Which Manasi?

WRITER. That girl I saw you with that day.

INDRAJIT. Oh! Her! But she isn't Manasi. Her name is...

WRITER. I don't want her name. I have named her Manasi.

INDRAJIT. What do you mean you have named her? Her parents call her...

WRITER. Listen, what does it matter what they call her? You just tell me...

INDRAJIT. What?

WRITER. About yourself and Manasi. What is she to you?

INDRAJIT. Sister!

WRITER. [Pause.] Sister?

INDRAJIT. Well, cousin then.

WRITER. Cousin? Why?

INDRAJIT. What do you mean why? Her mother is my aunt, that's why.

WRITER. I mean why were you with her?

INDRAJIT. She had to come to our house. I was seeing her home. I do that often.

WRITER. I see—so she isn't called Manasi.

INDRAJIT. No, I've already told you that.

WRITER. I thought you two were discussing something.

INDRAJIT. Yes, we were.

WRITER. Very seriously.

INDRAJIT. [*Laughs.*] Did you think so? Yes, probably that's how it looked. But I like talking to her. We often take a long way round to her house.

WRITER. Good, so you like talking to her. Why?

INDRAJIT. Well—It's difficult to say. Perhaps because it's so different from all the daily chatter.

WRITER. I see. So there's no cricket, politics, literature.

INDRAJIT. No, no cricket, politics or literature. Not every time, anyway.

WRITER. Then what do you talk about?

INDRAJIT. All sorts of things. About me, my friends and acquaintances. She talks about her family, her friends and her college. . .

WRITER. And then?

INDRAJIT. And *then*? Well, what sort of things do you and I talk about?

WRITER. Cricket, cinema, literature. . .

INDRAJIT. No, not every time. We talk about other things besides. About your writing, for instance, people, the future. . . Things one wants and doesn't want. . .

WRITER. I see. Penguins, Kangaroos, Eskimoes. . .

INDRAJIT. And why not? I can't talk about them to everyone.

WRITER. But you can to Manasi.

INDRAJIT. Her name isn't. . .

WRITER. I know her name isn't Manasi. But would you mind terribly if I called her Manasi?

INDRAJIT. [*Laughs.*] Not really. Besides I like your name. Her real name doesn't have the same poetry.

WRITER. All right then. Answer my question.

INDRAJIT. What question?

WRITER. Could you talk to her about things you discuss with me?

INDRAJIT. Not only could I but I have already done so. I have told her a lot of things I wouldn't tell you.

WRITER. Really?

INDRAJIT. Not that I couldn't. But I haven't anyway. It's not as though they were something special—just tit-bits from here and there. Some thoughts. Problems. Some things I like. Some which

I don't. Mostly very ordinary, very minor things.

WRITER. She is a friend of yours, isn't she?

INDRAJIT. I suppose so. I like talking to her, that's all. I feel happy after talking to her. Light. You know—all this that goes on all day, every day, unchanging. . . Well, don't you feel that?

WRITER. What?

INDRAJIT. That all these minutiae—they are all meaningless. There is just a large wheel going round and round. And we go round and round with it.

WRITER. One—two—three—one—two—three—two—one—three.

INDRAJIT. What did you say?

[*The song 'One—two—three' begins. Amal comes in as a professor.*]

AMAL. Roll Number Thirty-four!

INDRAJIT. Yes, Sir.

AMAL. What is the specific gravity of iron?

INDRAJIT. Eleven point seven, Sir.

[*A bell rings. Exit Amal. Vimal enters.*]

VIMAL. Roll Number Thirty-four!

INDRAJIT. Yes, Sir.

VIMAL. Who was Mazzini?

INDRAJIT. One of the founders of modern Italy.

[*A bell rings. Exit Vimal. Kamal enters.*]

KAMAL. Roll Number Thirty-four!

INDRAJIT. Yes, Sir.

KAMAL. How has the ancient Indian Literature been influenced by the essential asceticism of the Indian spirit?

INDRAJIT. The influence of the asceticism of the Indian spirit on ancient Indian Literature can be seen in the profusion of interpolations and the way descriptions, theoretical analyses and unrelated tales continually hamper the flow of the main story.

[*Exit Kamal. Loud music drowns Indrajit's voice. Enter Amal, young and boisterous.*]

AMAL. Indrajit, will you please answer the roll call for me? I'm going to a film.

INDRAJIT. All right.

[*Exit Amal. Enter Vimal.*]

VIMAL. Indrajit, can you lend me your chemistry notebook next Saturday?

INDRAJIT. O.K.

[*Exit Vimal. Enter Kamal.*]

KAMAL. Can you lend me a rupee, Indrajit? I'll return it on Monday.

INDRAJIT. I'm afraid I can't today. Tomorrow perhaps?

[*Exit Kamal. Enter Auntie.*]

AUNTIE. Shall I put the plate away then?

INDRAJIT. Just a moment, Mother.

AUNTIE. How long do you want me to wait? Just finish your supper, son, and give me my release!

[*Exit Auntie. Music gets louder and comes to an end with the refrain, 'Nine-eight-seven-six-five-four-three-two-one!'*]

INDRAJIT. We are all just going round and round and round...

AUNTIE. [*From inside.*] Indrajit...

INDRAJIT. Coming.

[*Exit. Auntie enters.*]

AUNTIE. Are you eating tonight or aren't you?

WRITER. No.

[*Exit Auntie. Enter Manasi.*]

MANASI. Finished writing?

WRITER. No.

[*Exit Manasi.*]

WRITER. One-two-three! Amal, Vimal, Kamal. And Indrajit. And Manasi. From home to school. From school to college. From college to the world. They are growing up. They are going round. Round and round and round. One-two-three-two-one. Amal, Vimal, Kamal. And Indrajit.

[*Amal, Vimal, Kamal and Indrajit are taking an exam. A table and a stool. Papers and answer books. The Writer acts as the invigilator. The bell rings.*]

WRITER. Time up. Stop writing please.

[*They continue to write hurriedly. The Writer snatches away the papers. They go out discussing in low, depressed voices.*]

WRITER. From school to college. College and examinations.

Examinations and results. And then the world.

[*Amal, Vimal, Kamal and Indrajit enter. The Writer arranges tables and chairs in the background.*]

AMAL. What will you do after passing the exam?

VIMAL. Let me pass first. I'll worry about it then.

KAMAL. Well, whether I pass or fail, I'll have to look out for a job. Father is retiring this year.

AMAL. Just looking out won't get you a job, you know. I scan the papers every morning. There just aren't any good ones going.

VIMAL. What are *you* grumbling about? I have three unmarried sisters to look after.

KAMAL. It was all good fun till now. As the results get nearer I can't even swallow my food.

WRITER. Amal Kumar Bose.

[*Amal screams with joy. The others congratulate him.*]

Vimal Kumar Ghosh.

[*As before.*]

Kamal Kumar Sen. Indrajit Ray.

[*As before in every case. Auntie comes in. They all touch her feet one after another. She blesses them. They go out noisily.*]

WRITER. Right. Now the world. On these chairs sit men of great virtue and intellect. They examine others. Judge them. Decide who is worth what. And on that long bench outside the door sit Amal, Vimal, Kamal, and Indrajit.

[*Amal, Vimal, Kamal and Indrajit enter.*]

Not yet! Not yet! One moment, please!

[*They all go out.*]

WRITER. Oh, yes! I had forgotten all about it. Before we come to that there is something more. Imagine that these chairs aren't here. Forget this bench. There's green grass here. That's a tree. And there beyond, an orange sky. The sun which rises every morning rose today as usual, and he is now setting. And in that corner, there between the branches, is the orange moon.

[*Indrajit and Manasi enter. She has a new book in her hand.*]

MANASI. Why are you giving me this present? I should give you one.

INDRAJIT. Why?

MANASI. After all, you are the successful candidate.

INDRAJIT. But where does it say that just because I've passed the examination, you have to give me a present? Why not the other way round?

MANASI. I don't know why. But that's the rule.

INDRAJIT. You always go by rules, don't you?

MANASI. [*Laughs.*] Whenever you allow me to.

INDRAJIT. You like it?

MANASI. Girls have to.

INDRAJIT. Girls have to! How often have I heard you say that about girls! Girls must follow the rules. Men can do what they like, but women must be obedient.

MANASI. But isn't that so?

INDRAJIT. I don't know. I accept several rules too. One has to study—that's a rule. One has to take exams—that's a rule. One must take up a job—that's one too. I accept them all. Of course I would have taken a job even if there was no rule about it.

MANASI. Why?

INDRAJIT. There are reasons. One is that I want to stand on my own feet. I don't like making my people pay for my education.

MANASI. And then?

INDRAJIT. There are others. Tell me one thing.

MANASI. Yes?

INDRAJIT. Is there a rule that one has to abide by rules?

MANASI. What else can one do?

INDRAJIT. One can hate rules. Why should they be there at all?

MANASI. What would be the point of hating them?

INDRAJIT. What's the point of worshipping the rope that binds you?

MANASI. I'm not asking you to worship it.

INDRAJIT. But you are! If the rope is a rule and you accept it happily—that is worshipping it.

MANASI. What else would you do with it?

INDRAJIT. Perhaps—tear it into shreds. Bring down all these walls which surround us.

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MANASI. And who are you supposed to be fighting?

INDRAJIT. The world! The people around us! What you call society. Have I told you about Leela?

MANASI. Her husband died of TB, didn't he?

INDRAJIT. Yes. That's the girl. He died a few months ago. Now her in-laws have thrown her out.

MANASI. Thrown her out?

INDRAJIT. They kept her at home for a few days. Took all the Provident Fund and Insurance money they could get. Took her ornaments and threw her out.

MANASI. Then?

INDRAJIT. Apparently she is staying with a second cousin of hers. This gentleman has a small shop, which is famous for stolen and smuggled goods.

MANASI. What will happen to Leela, do you think?

INDRAJIT. Nothing more to happen. Everything that could happen has already happened. I heard about it yesterday, though it happened three months ago. Tell me what sort of a rule is that?

[*No answer.*]

You know, one day at the bus-stop a boy of about seven started pestering me. Wanted to polish my shoes, he said. But he had a child on his waist and it was playing with the polishing rag.

[*No answer.*]

I didn't get my shoes polished. I didn't give him any money either. I chased him away. If he had bothered me more, I would probably have beaten him.

MANASI. [*Clutching his hand.*] But why?

INDRAJIT. I don't know. I don't know who should be beaten. I know I shouldn't hit him—still I would have. I could not accept him. I can't accept the rule either—the rule by which a boy of eight with a child in his arms has to go polishing shoes.

MANASI. But that's a different thing.

INDRAJIT. But how? It's the same sort of thing as in your home—where you observe every rule and then say, 'I have to!'

MANASI. [*Softly.*] Are you going to scold me?

INDRAJIT. You know I am not trying to scold you. [*Manasi doesn't reply.*] Don't you?

MANASI. Yes, I do.

INDRAJIT. Then why do you say such things?

MANASI. When I see you like this I feel scared.

INDRAJIT. Like this? Like what?

MANASI. All this—this anger. Anger against rules.

INDRAJIT. [*Laughs.*] It's a pointless anger. It's blind. Powerless. It only beats its head against the wall.

MANASI. Then why do you want to hurt yourself?

INDRAJIT. You know about the Tree of Knowledge, don't you?

MANASI. Yes, I do.

INDRAJIT. If I hadn't tasted the fruit of knowledge I could have gone on living in this paradise of your blessed society of rules. Now I can only batter my head against the wall.

[*A pause.*]

MANASI. Indra!

INDRAJIT. Yes?

MANASI. You know I'm stupid.

INDRAJIT. [*Laughs.*] What's the matter?

MANASI. I can't understand all that. I see things too. But I become sad; I feel a sense of pity. I can't be angry like you.

INDRAJIT. [*After a pause.*] Do you want me not to be angry?

MANASI. No, I want you to be as you are. It's only that I'm . . . I'm scared.

INDRAJIT. When this anger is gone, I'll be finished.

MANASI. [*Softly.*] I know Indra. [*Pause.*] Be what you are. Don't accept. Don't accept my fear either.

[*Silence.*]

MANASI. Sometimes I wonder . . . What would happen to me if you weren't there?

INDRAJIT. Why?

MANASI. You'll probably get annoyed if I tell you. I can accept a lot because you are there. If you weren't there—probably I should get very angry too.

INDRAJIT. So—I'm depriving you.

MANASI. Don't say that! Don't ever say that. [*Pause.*] How can I explain it? Don't you know what you mean to me? I feel stronger because of you. Strong enough to live. Otherwise I would have just gone in. [*Pause.*] But I can't get angry. I don't want to be angry. I like life. I accept a lot of things. I have to, but it doesn't worry me. Because you are there—I can take life more easily—more. . . [*Suddenly.*] I can't explain!

INDRAJIT. Go on. Tell me.

MANASI. No. I can't analyse things. Let's talk of something else.

INDRAJIT. We were talking of something else.

MANASI. If I don't understand this book will you explain it to me?

[*He stares at her.*]

Why aren't you saying anything?

INDRAJIT. The day I get a job—I'll marry you.

MANASI. No!

INDRAJIT. Just watch.

MANASI. But don't you see—I'm your first cousin.

INDRAJIT. How could I not see? You've reminded me every time

I've talked of marriage. How could I forget?

MANASI. And every time you say the same old thing again—that you won't accept it!

INDRAJIT. Of course I won't. Why should I? I shan't abide by anything. . .

MANASI. Not even me?

INDRAJIT. I like you, but not your rules.

MANASI. I'll soon get on your nerves.

INDRAJIT. Yes, that's another thing you go on about. . .

MANASI. Truly. I'm a very ordinary girl.

INDRAJIT. And I am extraordinary!

MANASI. I don't know. I think you are.

INDRAJIT. I am delighted to hear that!

MANASI. Well, then. You are *not* extraordinary.

INDRAJIT. Then there's no problem.

MANASI. What do you mean?

INDRAJIT. There should be no problem if an ordinary boy marries an ordinary girl.

MANASI. Of course, there is. Come, let's go home.

INDRAJIT. I don't want to go.

MANASI. We'll be late.

INDRAJIT. Let us.

MANASI. Yes, let us! At home I get told off every day because of you.

INDRAJIT. Home—Home—Home be damned. . .

MANASI. No. We won't start on that again. Get up. Let's go.

INDRAJIT. [*Gets up.*] All right.

MANASI. Oh! Angry again! And I'll be scared!

INDRAJIT. Look, you are getting late. You'll be told off at home. . .

MANASI. I am not going. . .

INDRAJIT. All right. Let's sit down.

MANASI. No, no, no! Let's go.

[*Indrajit puts his hand on her shoulder. She hurriedly removes it.*]

Indrajit! This is a public park!

INDRAJIT. So?

MANASI. [*Whispering as she points to the Writer who has just entered and is sitting in a corner.*] There—there's someone there under the tree.

INDRAJIT. So what?

MANASI. He'll see.

INDRAJIT. He will? Well, let him.

[*Puts his hand on her shoulder. Again she removes it hurriedly and walks out. He smiles and follows her.*]

WRITER. Indrajit and Manasi. They've come a long way. A long way? Have they really come? Or are they just going round and round? Round and round? They can get married. Then the same round again. They may not get married. Again the same round. One—two—three—four—three—two—one. It's all a question of going round and round. The answer is a circle—a zero. That's why no one asks the whole question. They cut it to suit their size. The answer they get is—life. A different sort of life for each man. . . .

[*Enter Amal, Vimal and Kamal.*]

Wait! Not now. Not yet.

[*Amal, Vimal and Kamal go out.*]

One moment, one single moment. Deny that circle. Deny that going round and round. Deny the whole question. One moment, one moment in the present. Life. And let's not add this life to other lives. For that will lead us to the whole problem again—resulting in a zero. Let us save this life. Let us save this one moment in the present—that is life.

[*The lights get dimmer as he finishes. Behind him is a table with chairs near it and outside the door there is a bench. The Writer goes away. Amal, Vimal, Kamal and Indrajit come and sit on the bench. They are well-dressed and serious. A bell rings. Amal gets up and goes in. He greets the invisible interviewers on the chairs. Sits on the chair in front with their permission. Answers questions silently.*]

VIMAL. Do you know the names of all the Cabinet Ministers?

KAMAL. No. Couldn't look them up.

VIMAL. We should have brought the Year Book along.

KAMAL. It wouldn't have helped. There's a limit to what one can look up.

VIMAL. Indrajit, what's the time?

INDRAJIT. Twenty-past-twelve.

KAMAL. They asked us to come at eleven. And the *burra sahib* turned up at twelve to interview us.

VIMAL. This is all a show, after all. They have already chosen their man.

KAMAL. Who's it? The one they interviewed before Amal?

VIMAL. I don't know. It won't be us. I know that.

KAMAL. How long has Amal been there?

INDRAJIT. About five minutes.

VIMAL. What do they ask for such a long time?

[*Amal gets up inside. As he tries to walk out through the front door, he is rebuked by the chairman. He giggles sheepishly and stumbles out of the other door.*]

KAMAL. Do they ask very technical questions?

VIMAL. Not very. Actually it's not the answer that matters. It's the way you answer.

KAMAL. If you don't know the answer, you should say 'I don't

know' smartly.

INDRAJIT. It's very difficult to say 'I don't know' smartly.

[*The bell rings. Vimal goes in.*]

KAMAL. I've a sore throat today. Do you have any peppermints on you?

INDRAJIT. No.

[*Kamal takes out a cigarette.*]

INDRAJIT. You have a sore throat and you smoke?

KAMAL. True. It won't help, will it?

[*Puts the cigarette back.*]

KAMAL. How many interviews have you had so far?

INDRAJIT. Five.

KAMAL. Good for you! This is my fourth. Have you heard from them?

INDRAJIT. Yes, a regret letter.

KAMAL. [*Pause.*] Father is retiring next month.

[*The Writer comes in and sits by Indrajit. Pause.*]

KAMAL. What time is it?

INDRAJIT. Half-past.

KAMAL. What time were you asked to come?

WRITER. Eleven. I had another interview at ten-thirty, so I had given up all hopes of coming here. I just took a chance, that's all.

KAMAL. Are you sure they haven't called you in yet?

WRITER. Yes. I'm very lucky.

KAMAL. You *are* lucky.

[*Exit Vimal. The bell again. Kamal goes in.*]

WRITER. Cigarette?

INDRAJIT. No, thanks, I don't smoke.

WRITER. [*Lights a cigarette himself.*] Do you know what questions they are asking?

INDRAJIT. No. They send them out through the other door.

WRITER. That's what they do usually. After all they can't have an unlimited stock of questions.

INDRAJIT. What was your other interview like?

WRITER. Not very good. Probably won't click. But it was a good job.

INDRAJIT. I see—that's why you went there first.

WRITER. Yes. But do you know—I am sure that is a wrong policy. When you badly need a job, you must go to the interview for the worse job first. The chances are better there.

INDRAJIT. Now you have made both.

WRITER. I was lucky this time. But when two interviews clash like this, I can't sleep nights. You don't know how much I need a job.

INDRAJIT. [*Smiles.*] We all need one.

WRITER. That's true enough. Generally everyone needs a job. But I need it particularly badly. The fact is—I have hired a flat—borrowed some money for it. After all one doesn't get a flat with all conveniences easily. This one is not a beauty—but at least it has an independent water closet.

INDRAJIT. I'm sorry—I don't follow you.

WRITER. The point is—I have got married without my father's permission. If I don't get a job this month, I'll lose the flat. You understand, don't you? How long can one keep a flat on borrowed money?

[Kamal goes out. Then Amal, Vimal and Kamal come in and act as the silent interviewers. Amal rings the bell and Indrajit goes in. The entire interview is mimed.]

WRITER. [*Throwing away his cigarette.*] Amal retires. His son Amal takes up a job. Vimal is ill. His son Vimal takes up a job. Kamal is dead. His son Kamal takes up a job. And Indrajit. And Indrajit's son Indrajit. There on the pavement is a seven-year-old boy with a box in his hand and a baby in his arms. There—on the pavement near him is a woman. Her name is Leela. Her husband died of TB. Beyond there is an orange sky under which Manasi wants to love life. Life. So many loves. So many parts and bits and parcels and pieces and molecules and atoms and they mix and mingle and move and turn and go round and round till they become a giant ferris wheel. And I have to write about them. I have to put into language the drama of these atoms going round and round. But language is senile and words are battered and maimed. [*Indrajit finishes his interview. The bell*

is rung.] The bell keeps ringing. One atom is lost and another is summoned by the bell. Three atoms are ringing the bell. More atoms, many more atoms, mix and mingle and make up the ferris wheel of this giant earth that goes round and round. And one by one, seconds, minutes, hours go round and round, round and round. [*The bell rings again. The interviewers are getting impatient.*] The bell is ringing. It will ring again. Still the earth goes on, the century goes on. Our earth—our century. The ferris wheel be damned. The question itself be damned. We are here—Amal, Vimal, Kamal. And Indrajit. And I. We are here, still here, here on earth.

[Amal, Vimal, Kamal stand up. Ring the bell frantically. But the dark deepens, leaving only the Writer in light.]

I am divided. I am broken into pieces, into atoms. I'm a symphony composed of atoms.

The earth is crushed, but it's still alive
The century's old, but it listens still
All the lights go off
A whisper in chorus in the dark
The earth is crushed, but it's still alive
The century's old, but it listens still
The earth is crushed, but it's still alive
The century's old, but it listens still.

ACT TWO

An office. Four chairs in a row. In another part of the stage, a big chair, a big table with a telephone on it. The Writer is dusting the furniture—barely touching it with the duster.

WRITER. [*Coming downstage.*] From home to school. From school to college. From college to the world. The world is an office. Like this one. A lot of business is transacted here—very important business. A lot of people work here—Amal, Vimal, Kamal and Indrajit.

[*Amal and Vimal come in.*]

AMAL. The 8.52 was ten minutes late today.

VIMAL. A tram broke down near Scaldah station and there was a huge traffic jam.

[*Kamal and Indrajit come in. Amal and Vimal sit down.*]

KAMAL. Today I missed the 9.13 again.

INDRAJIT. I had to let two buses go. There wasn't even enough space to hang on.

[*Kamal and Indrajit sit down.*]

AMAL. [*To Vimal.*] How is your son?

VIMAL. Better. [*To Kamal.*] Has your daughter secured admission?

KAMAL. No such luck. [*To Indrajit.*] Have you found your pen?

INDRAJIT. No. Must have been stolen.

AMAL. Hareesh...

VIMAL. Hareesh...

KAMAL. Hareesh...

INDRAJIT. Hareesh...

AMAL. [*A little more loudly.*] Hareesh...

WRITER. Yes, Sir.

AMAL. Bring me a glass of water.

VIMAL. [*Loudly.*] Hareesh...

WRITER. Yes, Sir.

VIMAL. Bring me a betel-leaf and *zarda*.

KAMAL. Two cigarettes—'Scissors'!

INDRAJIT. [*Loudly.*] Hareesh...

WRITER. Yes, Sir.

INDRAJIT. Post this letter.

[*The Writer doesn't move. Nor do they give him anything. They don't even look at him.*]

AMAL. The pick-pockets have become such a terrible nuisance. The other day when the Dharamtalla tram left the Mowlali stop . . .

VIMAL. If you want homocopathic medicine see Kanai Bhattacharya. My brother-in-law had chronic dysentery . . .

KAMAL. They are giving her an admission test for the third standard. Can you imagine! English, Bengali and Arithmetic! On top of that they want the birth certificate.

[*The Writer becomes the boss and strides in. The three half rise and then sit down scratching their heads. The Writer takes his seat and the telephone rings.*]

WRITER. Hello—hello—yes—yes—order—invoice—delivery—fifteen per cent—yes—yes—bye.

[*Changes files from the 'In' tray to the 'Out' and back again. Amal goes in and gets a file signed. Comes out. Then Vimal. Then Kamal. Then Indrajit. Then the phone.*]

WRITER. Hello—hello—yes—yes—order—invoice—delivery—fifteen per cent—yes—yes—bye.

[*Changes files from 'In' to 'Out'.*]

AMAL. Hareesh . . .

VIMAL. Hareesh . . .

KAMAL. Hareesh . . .

INDRAJIT. Hareesh . . .

[*The Writer moves to the peon's stool with the duster in his hand. Again the calls.*]

AMAL. Hareesh . . .

VIMAL. Hareesh . . .

KAMAL. Hareesh . . .

INDRAJIT. Hareesh . . .

WRITER. [*Gets up. To each of them.*] Yes, Sir—Yes, Sir—Yes, Sir—Yes, Sir . . .

AMAL. Vimal Babu.

[*The Writer takes Amal's file to Vimal. Vimal takes it and gives him*

another one.]

VIMAL. Kamal Babu.

[The Writer takes Vimal's file to Kamal. Kamal takes it and gives him another one.]

KAMAL. Nirmal Babu.

WRITER. Nirmal Babu has already retired, Sir.

KAMAL. Oh! Indrajit Babu.

[The Writer takes Kamal's file to Indrajit. Indrajit gives him another file.]

INDRAJIT. Amal Babu.

AMAL. Vimal Babu.

VIMAL. Kamal Babu.

KAMAL. Indrajit Babu.

[This happens thrice, getting faster each time, until the Writer is practically hurling himself from table to table. The bell rings. The Writer goes in to the Boss at the sound of the bell.]

AMAL. Hareesh...

VIMAL. Hareesh...

INDRAJIT. Hareesh...

WRITER. *[Comes out.]* I've to bring tea for the sahib.

AMAL. O...

VIMAL. O...

KAMAL. O...

INDRAJIT. O...

[The Writer takes a round instead of bringing tea and returns down-stage.]

WRITER. After the files, tea. Then files. Then snacks. Then files. Then tea. Then files. Then tram-bus-train. There are bigger offices where even more important business is transacted. There files—then tea—then files—then lunch—then files—then coffee—then files and then office transport, taxi, car.

AMAL. *[To Kamal.]* Hello Ghosh, old boy! Going to the club tonight?

VIMAL. I'm afraid not. My wife has invited a few old friends home.

KAMAL. Hello Ray, old boy! Have you got your car back from the garage yet?

INDRAJIT. No such luck. The clutch plate's burnt out, I'm told. Couldn't even get a taxi in time this morning. My servant took forty-five minutes to find one.

[*The Writer has become the boss again. The phone rings.*]

WRITER. Hello—hello—yes—yes—the Board of Directors—conference—budget—Annual Report—yes—yes—bye! Miss Malhotra. . .

MANASI. [*Enters with a steno-pad.*] Yes, Sir.

WRITER. [*Walking about as Manasi takes dictation.*] With reference to the above letter—in connexion with the above matter, I would request you—I shall be obliged if—forward us at your earliest convenience—let this office know immediately—fifteenth ultimo—twenty-fifth instant—thanking you—assuring you of our best cooperation—yours sincerely, sincerely yours.

[*Telephone.*]

Hello—yes—yes—the Board of Directors—conference—budget—Annual Report—yes—yes—bye!

That's all, Miss Malhotra.

[*Manasi leaves. The Writer comes out front.*]

That's all, Miss Malhotra. That's all, ladies and gentlemen. That's all.

AMAL. That's all.

VIMAL. That's all.

KAMAL. That's all.

ALL THREE. [*Together.*] That's all.

[*Indrajit is quiet. They look at him wondering, then burst out laughing.*]

AMAL. Buck up, old boy.

VIMAL. Cheerio, old boy.

KAMAL. All the best, old boy.

[*They slap him on the back and go out. The Writer takes a round and becomes the peon. Goes to Indrajit who is looking at a file absently.*]

WRITER. Looking for something, Sir?

INDRAJIT. What? Yes, I am.

WRITER. What?

INDRAJIT. Something besides all this.

WRITER. Like what?

INDRAJIT. Well—nothing—nothing really. Is there nothing except this?

WRITER. I can't understand what you are looking for, Sir.

INDRAJIT. I don't seem to find anything, Harceesh. . . Anyway, let that be. Now look. Just put this file on Amal Babu's table tomorrow morning, this one on Vimal Babu's and this one on Kamal Babu's. Get the sahib's signature on this letter. I may not come tomorrow.

WRITER. Aren't you feeling well, Sir?

INDRAJIT. Well? Probably I shall not feel well tomorrow. That's possible. Good night.

[*Goes out.*]

WRITER. Amal's left. Vimal's left. Kamal's also left. Only Indrajit sits there thinking. . . Now he's also left. And me? I am thinking. Yes, I am thinking. Am thinking. Only thinking.

I sit with the part, and think of the whole. I sit in the dust and think of the earth. And I screen the dust that is the earth that is crushed. Why? Are the seeds of life mixed with the dust? But the earth is crushed, the sky is barren, and the century nods in senile stupor. But I still sit and think. I still think of Man, the whole Man, and the fragments of my consciousness are still searching—searching for something else.

[*Auntie comes in.*]

AUNTIE. So you are here! I have been searching for you everywhere. What are you doing?

WRITER. Thinking. I am sitting and thinking.

AUNTIE. I see. And what are you thinking about?

WRITER. I am wondering. . . Who are we?

AUNTIE. What's there to think so much about in that? You are you. Who else?

WRITER. That's true enough. We are us. I hadn't thought of that, I must admit. But what are we?

AUNTIE. Listen to him. What are we? You are all bright pieces of gems, that's what you are. You've got good degrees, good jobs!

WRITER. Right again. Pieces of gems. Pieces. Scraps. I had seen that part. But I had not seen the gems aspect of it.

AUNTIE. What are you babbling now?

WRITER. That answers two riddles. Now the third one—this is not that easy.

AUNTIE. Yes. . .

WRITER. *Why* are we?

AUNTIE. What do you mean?

WRITER. I mean, why are we here?

AUNTIE. Oh, shut up. Why shouldn't you be here? You haven't done any harm to anyone, have you?

WRITER. No, no, no. That's not a logical answer.

AUNTIE. Who wants your logic? Forever asking such stupid questions. This is what happens when one doesn't get married at the right age.

WRITER. But how does marriage come into this?

AUNTIE. Why won't it come? Who are we—why—how—where! Why do they come into this? Why don't you get married? Answer that first.

WRITER. That's no easy question to answer, when I don't even know why I should!

AUNTIE. Listen to him. Why? Why shouldn't you? Everyone gets married. Why shouldn't you?

WRITER. That's it. That's it. That's the answer. . . .

Everyone does it.

Why should you sneeze? Why should you cough?

Why should you smile and why should you laugh?

Why should you sulk and why should you sigh?

Everybody does it, that's why, that's why.

AUNTIE. God! He's started on his poetry again. I'm going. . .

[*Tries to go out. Writer stops her.*]

WRITER. Why should you love? Why should you hate?

Why should you suffer and blame it on fate?

Why should you weep and why should you cry?

Everybody does it. That's why, that's why.

AUNTIE. When did I weep or cry?

WRITER. Why should you always sleep in the night?

Why should you always try to be right?

Why should you live? Why should you die?

Everybody does it! That's why, that's why.

AUNTIE. Silly boy! I'm not going to listen to you any more. You would be all right if you got married.

[*Exit.*]

WRITER. Yes! Marriage! Birth, marriage and death! Birth, then marriage and then death. A long time ago I read a beautiful story. I don't know whether you've read it or not. I've forgotten most of it, but. . . There was a prince. There was a princess. After a lot of to-do they got married. Then comes the real point of the story. Then they lived happily and ruled over their kingdom. Kingdom or home? I can't remember the details. . . But I do remember that they lived happily ever after. They lived so happily that there was no more story to tell.

[*Marriage music. Manasi comes in, in a ghoonghat, blushing like a bride.*]

Marriage. A man and a woman.

Dampati, jampati, jaya-pati.

A couple. In other words, bridegroom and bride.

[*Amal enters looking like a recently married man.*]

MANASI. [*Happily.*] What! Are you back already?

AMAL. I told my boss that I didn't feel well.

MANASI. [*Concerned.*] Is that true?

AMAL. I didn't feel well without you.

MANASI. [*Laughing.*] You silly!

AMAL. Aren't you glad to see me?

MANASI. [*Smiling.*] No, why should I be?

[*They laugh. Manasi comes to Amal and they embrace.*]

WRITER. *Dampati, jampati, jaya-pati.*

A couple. In other words, husband and wife.

[*Manasi becomes a housewife. Vimal sits on a chair and reads the newspaper.*]

MANASI. Has anything special happened today?

VIMAL. No. The same old stuff.

MANASI. I thought perhaps a calamity was about to strike the world.

VIMAL. Why? What happened?

MANASI. You haven't taken your head out of the newspaper all morning.

VIMAL. I was just glancing through. [*Puts the paper down.*] What did you want?

MANASI. Nothing. Wanted to ask you what you were doing this evening.

VIMAL. Why? What's the matter?

MANASI. Nothing really. I thought we could go for a walk.

VIMAL. For a walk? . . . But I had to attend a farewell party in the office. One of our men is retiring. Anyway, where did you want to go?

MANASI. Nowhere. It's all right. . . . It's nine o'clock and you haven't shaved yet!

VIMAL. Nine! Oh my God!

[*Exit Vimal.*]

WRITER. *Dampati, jampati, jaya-pati.*

A couple. In other words, father and mother.

[*Kamal enters.*]

MANASI. What's wrong with you? Your son's down with fever and you come back at ten o'clock.

KAMAL. Here. I've brought you some barley.

MANASI. So you've brought some barley! Now! At ten o'clock! There must be a limit to how irresponsible one can be. He hasn't eaten all day.

KAMAL. Hasn't he?

MANASI. I got hold of whatever I could and gave him something.

KAMAL. How's he now? Any temperature?

MANASI. Ninety-nine. Where is the *mosambi*?

KAMAL. Our fruit-vendor is a rascal. Asked me a rupee for four.

I'll bring some from the market tomorrow.

MANASI. Go in and have a wash. I'll lay the food.

[*Manasi and Kamal go out in different directions.*]

WRITER. *Dampati, jampati, jaya-pati.*

Bride—bridegroom—husband—wife—father and mother.

Amal, Vimal, Kamal and Indrajit.

[Enter Indrajit.]

Hello—Indrajit!

INDRAJIT. You? What a delightful surprise! I never thought we would meet here like this.

[They shake hands.]

WRITER. Well, well. How many years is it since we met?

INDRAJIT. About seven—I think.

WRITER. Where were you all those years? In Bhopal?

INDRAJIT. No. The Bhopal job lasted only about a year. I've been around since then. Bombay, Jullunder, Meerut, Udaipur. It's a transferable job. I keep moving.

WRITER. That's what you wanted.

INDRAJIT. Is it? I don't know.

WRITER. Why, have you forgotten? Penguin, Kangaroo, Eskimo. . .

INDRAJIT. Oh. The Simple School Geography. You still remember it!

WRITER. Why, have you forgotten?

INDRAJIT. No, I haven't. But my views have changed. I wonder what it would have been like—if I had really started from Howrah that day with a rupee and twelve annas in my pocket. But now I feel that there is no world beyond our geography. At least not in this country.

WRITER. Is it there in other countries?

INDRAJIT. How should I know? I have never been abroad. I had an interview for a job in Malaya. Didn't get it.

WRITER. Would you have gone if you had got it?

INDRAJIT. Why not?

WRITER. So you are not married yet?

INDRAJIT. No. Never had the time for it. You?

WRITER. The same.

INDRAJIT. What about the others?

WRITER. The others?

INDRAJIT. You know. Amal—Vimal—and Kamal.

WRITER. They are well. They have got jobs. They are married. They own houses.

INDRAJIT. Your tone doesn't indicate that all's well.

WRITER. No. No. They really are doing very well. I don't envy them, though. Would you?

INDRAJIT. I don't know.

WRITER. How is Manasi?

INDRAJIT. Manasi? Oh, yes, her! You always called her Manasi! Yes, she is all right.

WRITER. Where is she?

INDRAJIT. [*Laughs.*] What you are actually asking is whether she is married or not. No—she isn't. She is teaching in a school at Hazaribagh.

WRITER. [*Pause.*] Is that all? Nothing more?

INDRAJIT. What more do you want to learn?

WRITER. Whatever you tell me.

INDRAJIT. [*Smiles.*] There isn't anything more. Nothing worth mentioning ever happens. I have a job. She has a job. I write. She replies. We meet about once a year. We arrange to meet in Calcutta. That's all.

WRITER. Aren't you two getting married?

INDRAJIT. Not that we won't. We haven't yet, that's all.

WRITER. Why don't you get married and be done with it?

INDRAJIT. I don't know why—can't give a reason. If we had got married immediately after my graduation without thinking about it, that would have been it. We didn't know then, didn't think. We talked of so many things, sitting there in that park. Planned so many projects. Argued about so many problems. One day it just happened that. . .

[*Manasi comes and sits on the grass. Indrajit sits by her side. The Writer walks into a dark corner.*]

MANASI. I can't, Indra, I can't.

INDRAJIT. Why not?

MANASI. Don't force me, please. Give me some more time.

INDRAJIT. Time—time—time! I have been waiting for six months now.

MANASI. What am I to do? I don't have courage.

INDRAJIT. It's not a question of courage. Do you want to say

'Yes'?

MANASI. Not everything is achieved by mere wanting. . .

INDRAJIT. I don't know about 'everything'. But marriage, yes.

MANASI. Men can do. . .

INDRAJIT. I know—I know—Men can do what they like—but not women. Women can think, accept and ask for more time.

MANASI. Why are you getting annoyed?

INDRAJIT. [*Pause.*] I am not getting annoyed. I'm leaving for Bhopal tomorrow. That's why I wanted to know today.

MANASI. But Bhopal isn't the end of the world.

INDRAJIT. [*Pause.*] I don't know.

MANASI. Indra. . .

INDRAJIT. Manasi, I don't know—I don't know anything.

MANASI. [*Pause.*] Then try and get to know. Go to Bhopal and see. . .

INDRAJIT. Now who's getting annoyed?

MANASI. I'm not annoyed, Indra. I've thought about it a lot. Life isn't a game of dolls.

[*Indrajit stares at her. Darkness. A beam of light falls on the Writer.*]

INDRAJIT. So the two of us couldn't have our doll's game either.

We thought a lot. Measured a lot. Counted a lot. I do even now. And I wonder if life may just remain a game of dolls. All this priceless life. Do you read the newspapers?

WRITER. Sometimes.

INDRAJIT. I read a long time ago that all those atomic weapons are controlled by buttons. And there are interlocking systems so that nobody can spark off an atomic warfare by pushing the wrong button. Just imagine, a minor oversight could destroy the whole world!

WRITER. So?

INDRAJIT. Nothing. This priceless, invaluable life—about which we think so much, measure and count. . .

WRITER. You mean you want to get married now but Manasi won't decide. . .

INDRAJIT. No, not that—at least not now. One doesn't really think of the atom bomb all the time. You look at the starlit sky

and you think of what astronomy tells us—about the insignificance of this minute earth in the solar system. What's this human life worth, sticking to it like germs to a speck? Still, if one thought of all this all the time, one wouldn't live.

WRITER. Yet you do think of it!

INDRAJIT. Can't help it. But there are times when I think life is vast, when I forget how ephemeral my life is in the total flow of time—a mere second. I forget that my existence is a pointless particle of dust. I start believing that nothing is more valuable than my life in this world.

WRITER. That's nature's greatest gift to us—this ability to forget. It helps us to live.

INDRAJIT. But it's not enough! It's the gift of the Tree of Knowledge. The starlit sky confuses everything. It confuses every little thing. You—me—Manasi—Kamal—Vimal—Amal—all.

[Music rises in the background. Song. Darkness on stage. The Writer and Indrajit are lit up. In the background, Manasi, standing like a statue. On the other side appear the silhouettes of Amal, Vimal, Kamal. The music changes slowly into a chorus of voices.]

To seek a break in the unchanging rhythm of death is perhaps the most foolish and futile attempt of Man in this world.

[Manasi becomes brighter as light is focussed on her.]

MANASI. I may be a germ, but still I seek, seek without shame. The audacious assertion of life claims immortality in its brief spark.

[Light goes off. When it comes back the Writer is alone, downstage.]

WRITER. The audacious assertion of life. Whose life? Indrajit, Manasi, me and who else? Amal, Vimal and Kamal?

[Amal enters.]

AMAL. How are you, Poet?

WRITER. Fine, thank you.

AMAL. Still writing?

WRITER. Yes, occasionally.

AMAL. Have you finished your play yet?

WRITER. No. How are you?

AMAL. Not well, not well, my dear fellow.

WRITER. Why? What happened?

AMAL. I'm working in this rotten A.B.C. Company. I've wasted my life there. Six years as the Senior Assistant. Yet they have taken a Madrassce Babu as the Assistant Manager.

WRITER. Is he good?

AMAL. What are you asking? This is the day of the Madrassces. We Bengalis will die at the hands of other Bengalis. Actually it's all my fault. I had an offer from P.Q.R. Company. Didn't take it. Thought I should get promotion in my office—so why go? What's the point? I'm fed up with life.

WRITER. How are things at home? All right?

AMAL. How can they be all right? How long can I continue to be in the same post? Senior Assistant for the last six years! All right, Brother. I must go. I have got some work.

[*Exit Amal. Enter Vimal.*]

VIMAL. How are you, Poet?

WRITER. Fine, thank you.

VIMAL. Still writing?

WRITER. Yes, occasionally.

VIMAL. Have you finished your play yet?

WRITER. No. How are you?

VIMAL. Oh! Well, carrying on. Our firm has got a good heavy engineering contract. So have been transferred to Ranchi. Am leaving tomorrow.

WRITER. Are you taking your family along with you?

VIMAL. Yes, yes, we have been given good quarters. As for 'family' there's only the Mrs. I've sent my son to La Martiniere School. I don't know what schooling is like in Ranchi, you see.

WRITER. In short, you are doing quite well.

VIMAL. Well. Muddling along, what? All right. I've to go now. Have to do some last-minute shopping in the New Market. Can I give you a lift?

WRITER. No thanks.

VIMAL. O.K. then. So long.

[*Exit Vimal. Enter Kamal.*]

KAMAL. How are you, Poet?

WRITER. Fine, thank you.

KAMAL. Still writing?

WRITER. No.

KAMAL. I know. I know. Problems of life kill all those hobbies. I too used to play the mouth-organ once. Couldn't develop that talent. When it got damaged, I couldn't even get it repaired. Inflation you know. Have you insured yourself?

WRITER. Not yet.

KAMAL. Tut, tut, tut. This is not proper—this carelessness. You need security in life, Brother. What other security is there in life? Get yourself insured—at once—for at least ten thousand.

WRITER. In whose name?

KAMAL. Aren't you married?

WRITER. No.

KAMAL. Oh—ho! But that can be mended easily. It doesn't take much time to get married. And children will start arriving soon. Later you will have to pay a higher rate of premium. Besides, you'll need some support in your old age. Come—tell me. Tell me—how much do you want to get insured for? I'll make all arrangements. . .

WRITER. Have you given up your job then?

KAMAL. Given my job up? In this day and age? You think I've gone mad? Still—I am involved in a business deal. If it clicks, I'll be able to kick my job, insurance, everything. Listen, do you know any financier who could lend about twenty-five thousand? It's a marvellous scheme. Forty per cent profit guaranteed. I can prove it to you. . .

WRITER. I'm afraid all that's beyond me rather.

KAMAL. Not to worry. I'll catch someone. It's such a gold mine, there'll be no shortage of financiers. I'll say bye then. Think about your insurance seriously.

[Exit.]

WRITER. The audacious assertion of life claims immortality of its brief spark. These are sparks. I have to write my play on the story of the claims of immortality of these brief sparks—Amal, Vimal, Kamal and Indrajit.

[*Indrajit enters.*]

WRITER. And what immortality does your life claim, Indrajit?

INDRAJIT. Immortality? What do you mean?

WRITER. Nothing. Have you met Manasi?

INDRAJIT. No. Not yet. But I've to meet her in that park, over there.

[*Goes upstage.*]

WRITER. That park over there. Under that shaggy tree. So many words, so many old hopes are mixed in the dust there. And in the green grass, life germinated, was nurtured, was reared up, by so many words weaving and entwining one another in so many glowing days. Indrajit and Manasi, they will sit in that park again. They'll sit on that green grass, and they'll talk. More words. But words grow old. The same words come back again and again. But still, let's go and sit on that grass sweet with the smell of earth. And sit together, for some time, in the rosy breeze of the twilight.

[*Manasi comes and sits near Indrajit. They begin to talk. The Writer goes to one corner.*]

INDRAJIT. We won't meet again for a long time.

MANASI. Why?

INDRAJIT. I want to go out.

MANASI. Out? But you are out of Calcutta already.

INDRAJIT. No. Further out. Abroad.

MANASI. Where exactly?

INDRAJIT. London.

MANASI. Have you found work there?

INDRAJIT. Not yet. But I've collected enough money to let myself go. I have enrolled in an engineering school. The passport is all ready. I'll look for some work when I get there.

MANASI. And if you don't find any?

INDRAJIT. I'll find something.

MANASI. But what if you don't?

INDRAJIT. I'm bound to find something. I'm alone after all. Won't need much.

MANASI. How long are you going to go on like this?

INDRAJIT. As long as I can.

MANASI. Do you like this sort of existence?

INDRAJIT. No.

MANASI. Then?

INDRAJIT. Then what?

MANASI. Why don't you settle down in one place?

INDRAJIT. Will that improve matters?

MANASI. I don't know.

INDRAJIT. I don't either. Actually words mean little. I don't know what 'improvement' means any more. There's no question of improvement.

MANASI. [*Pause.*] Indra . . .

INDRAJIT. Yes . . .

MANASI. Would you settle down if we got married?

INDRAJIT. I don't know. I can't decide anything now. I could once.

MANASI. Do you often feel angry with me?

INDRAJIT. Not any more. Who knows what marriage would do to us. Perhaps even our friendship would die.

MANASI. Perhaps there will be another type of friendship—something deeper, more meaningful . . .

INDRAJIT. I don't know, Manasi, I don't know anything. I've thought a lot. Argued a lot. But I can't find an answer. I'm tired now. Now arguments don't mean a thing. Nor can I do anything. I just feel tired—exhausted. I just do what I feel like doing at the moment.

[*Silence.*]

MANASI. Let's go for a walk.

INDRAJIT. Come.

[*They go. The Writer enters with heavy steps.*]

WRITER. I am tired—I am very tired

Let all these rapid questions be.

In the mute enveloping darkness let me just go to sleep.

What's the use of all these words?

Why fling arguments in the wild winds?

I am sick of reasoning now.

Alone, in the depth of shadows, let me just go to sleep.
My quests are tired and still is unknown the last analysis
of the world.

My efforts limp while the heavy earth lies immobile
and numb.

Hope, waiting hope, waiting on the banks of death is
tired too.

Go, take your questions, logic, arguments with you.
Let me be . . .

In the dark womb of shadows let me sleep . . .

I am very tired.

ACT THREE

Amal, Vimal and Kamal are playing cards. Each line is followed by the throw of a card. After every third card, the cards are mixed and the game begins anew.

AMAL. On 15 August 1947 India became Independent.

VIMAL. We escaped from the clutches of the British Empire.

KAMAL. Now we have to build a self-sufficient, self-supporting society.

AMAL. We have to dismantle the capitalist system.

VIMAL. Fascism is leading the world to destruction.

KAMAL. Communism kills man's sense of himself and his freedom.

AMAL. The democratic process is agonizingly slow.

VIMAL. Dictatorship has always been proved an evil.

KAMAL. Most people have to suffer under any system.

AMAL. Our country has become the home of anarchy and corruption.

VIMAL. Our government can't be trusted to do anything.

KAMAL. Power corrupts. . .

AMAL. Politics is dirty. . .

VIMAL. Just concern yourself with your own work.

KAMAL. If I am alive, all is well.

AMAL. There has been no promotion.

VIMAL. The living quarters are terrible.

KAMAL. Business is bad.

AMAL. My family is ill.

VIMAL. My son failed again.

KAMAL. My father has died.

AMAL. Bloody shame.

VIMAL. Damned nuisance.

KAMAL. Ugh!

AMAL. Vimal. . .

VIMAL. Kamal. . .

KAMAL. Amal. . .

AMAL. Vimal. . .

VIMAL. Kamal...

KAMAL. Amal...

VOICE. [*Off-stage.*] And Indrajit.

[*Enter the Writer.*]

AMAL. How are you, Poet?

VIMAL. How are you, Poet?

KAMAL. How are you, Poet?

WRITER. Received a letter from Indrajit yesterday.

AMAL. What does he say?

VIMAL. Hasn't he gone abroad?

KAMAL. Hasn't he returned yet?

WRITER. He has finished his course successfully.

AMAL. That's good news.

VIMAL. He won't have any difficulty finding a job. Engineers are in great demand.

KAMAL. Foreign degrees have great value in our country.

WRITER. Do you want to hear what he says?

AMAL. Yes, indeed.

VIMAL. Is it a very long letter?

KAMAL. Let it be—let it be.

[*The Writer reads the letter. The three go on playing cards silently.*]

WRITER. Calcutta, Bhopal, Bombay, Jullunder, Meerut, Udaipur, Calcutta, London. Everything goes round and round like a wheel. Still it's not a proper wheel, it's a spiral. And that precisely is the tragedy—the tragedy of knowing. I catch something. And just when I understand it, it suddenly ends and I throw it away. Then again I grab at something else. Still the hope for a sudden, unexpected, wonderful happening doesn't die. One continues to feel that this isn't all. Some time something must happen to fill the world with a dazzling light, throwing the past into obscurity. What a silly dream. The sleep ends—but not the hangover of the dream.

[*Indrajit comes in and stands by the Writer.*]

INDRAJIT. Whatever I wished to have, I have got. But there is no sense of achievement in it—that is the bitter truth. It is stupid to hope that more will come and one will sprout more hands to

seize it. It's pathetic. Just a dream. The past and the present are two ends of a single rope. They are apart because the dream is alive. Otherwise the future could easily be broken down and thrown into the arms of the past. The past instead of remaining a wait for the vague, smoky future could be turned into a well-defined point—Death!

MANASI. [*Enters.*] Death!

INDRAJIT. Yes, death. Dying! That is the greatest happiness. Who knows how many became happy by dying. They have caught all the future in the mould of the past—that's why they are happy. I shall have to die like that one day. Then why not now?

MANASI. Don't say that. . . Live! Live long!

INDRAJIT. One needs faith to live. Faith in God, faith in fortune, faith in man, faith in work, faith in revolution, faith in oneself—faith in love. Tell me—which of them is alive in me today?

MANASI. Not faith in life?

INDRAJIT. Life? Engaging oneself in petty trivialities when one can't answer the only question that matters. What meaningless poses and lies for which there is no real need. No real need. Still, one must do it. There's life. Man's life. And I am one among a million. The lie in my life is the lie in the lives of millions.

MANASI. What do you want to do?

INDRAJIT. What shall I do? Shall I go to sleep? Or shall I laugh it off? Perhaps that's better. Life is so farcical that it is no use hiding one's laughter away. . .

[Indrajit bursts into laughter, suddenly. The Writer and Manasi walk off in different directions. Amal, Vimal, Kamal, suddenly start laughing. The Writer re-enters and walks downstage. Loud laughter which slowly dies away as . . .]

WRITER. [*To the audience, as though they have been laughing.*] Don't laugh. For God's sake, don't laugh. I beg of you, be quiet, please. True, I am not succeeding with the play. But don't you see I'm trying my best. A Play—a play about Amal, Vimal, Kamal? And Indrajit?

[Auntie enters.]

AUNTIE. Aren't you eating?

WRITER. No.

[*Auntie departs. Manasi comes in.*]

MANASI. Aren't you eating?

WRITER. [*Hides his face in his hands.*] Not you too. . .

MANASI. Sorry—I forgot—Have you written anything?

WRITER. How can I? Indrajit isn't coming back. He has written three letters in three years. Every time, the same old thing.

MANASI. What?

WRITER. About going round and round and round and not dying.

Those arrogant dreams going round in the head are not dying.

Tell me—how can you write a play about someone who sees life realistically and dreams about it romantically?

MANASI. I can't think of a better protagonist for a play.

WRITER. No. It is not possible. The more I tie him up in a plot the more he escapes; says it isn't real. The more lines I write for him, the more he stands outside them. Says they are not real.

Oh! He knows too much—altogether too much.

MANASI. Still he dreams.

WRITER. That dream will collapse one day.

MANASI. I know.

WRITER. And then?

MANASI. Let it.

WRITER. And then what?

MANASI. Then he won't try to clutch at a dream.

WRITER. What then? Won't he go under?

MANASI. Let him. Then he may find firm earth at the bottom.

Then he may start living again.

WRITER. How do you know that?

MANASI. Me? What do I know? Nothing. I am stupid. I know nothing. I only believe. . .

[*Exit.*]

WRITER. Belief? Belief in the firm earth at the bottom?

INDRAJIT. [*Comes in reciting.*]

Keeping afloat

Clutching at a piece of straw,

Life resting on a wretched faith
Of a believer.
The land is blurred
In a grey mist of sighs,
The bright realms beyond the clouds
Are lost in lies
In this love sojourn.
So take away the crutches
Of false consolations!
Take away the blindfold of faith
From the eyes!
Get drowned!
Go under and see
How far is the bottom
How deep!
Man moves;
Man is the strangest of creatures!
He builds his house on the rocks
In the depth of the seas.

WRITER. Indrajit. . .

INDRAJIT. Yes.

WRITER. You are back.

INDRAJIT. Yes.

WRITER. When did you come?

INDRAJIT. Some time ago.

WRITER. Where are you now?

INDRAJIT. In Calcutta.

WRITER. What are you doing?

INDRAJIT. Working.

WRITER. Married?

INDRAJIT. Yes.

WRITER. Ah! So Manasi agreed. . .

INDRAJIT. No.

WRITER. Then?

INDRAJIT. Married somebody else.

WRITER. Somebody else?

INDRAJIT. Yes.

WRITER. Whom?

INDRAJIT. A woman. . .

WRITER. Name?

INDRAJIT. Manasi.

WRITER. But how is that possible?

INDRAJIT. That's what usually happens. Manasis come and go.

One can get married to only one of them. The others come and go. Manasi's sister Manasi. Manasi's friend Manasi. Manasi's daughter Manasi.

WRITER. Like Amal, Vimal and Kamal?

INDRAJIT. Yes, like Amal, Vimal, Kamal and Indrajit.

[Enter Manasi as Indrajit's wife.]

Ah! Meet my wife Manasi. A very old friend of mine—he's a Writer.

WRITER. *Namaskar.*

MANASI. *Namaskar.* What do you write?

WRITER. Whatever's possible.

MANASI. You are writing anything now?

WRITER. I'm trying to write a play.

MANASI. Could you read it out to me?

WRITER. Yes, indeed. When I finish it.

MANASI. Oh! But is there a lot left?

WRITER. Not much. I'll start in a day or two.

MANASI. You mean you haven't started yet?

WRITER. How could I?

MANASI. But you just said you would soon finish it.

WRITER. Well, you see, in this play there isn't much difference between the beginning and the end. It's a circular play.

MANASI. I'm afraid I don't quite understand. . .

INDRAJIT. Of course you don't, Manasi. It's not meant to be understood. . .

MANASI. But surely one says something to be understood.

INDRAJIT. One used to. But now it's a question of habit. .

MANASI. Go on. . . Don't be silly. . .

INDRAJIT. It is silly. Look there. . .

[*Amal, Vimal, Kamal enter and stand chatting at the other end of the stage.*]

MANASI. Who is that?

WRITER. They are Amal, Vimal, and Kamal.

AMAL. Plutocracy—monarchy—democracy.

VIMAL. Imperialism, fascism, marxism.

KAMAL. Economics, politics, sociology.

AMAL. Quotations, tender, statement.

VIMAL. Report, minutes, budget.

KAMAL. Meeting, committee, conference.

AMAL. Civilization, education, culture.

VIMAL. Literature, philosophy, history.

KAMAL. *Brahma, nirvana, bhooma.*

AMAL. Raj Kapoor, Mala Sinha, Vishwajit.

VIMAL. Umrigar, Krishnan, Milka Singh.

KAMAL. Hemant Kumar, S. D. Burman, Lata Mangeshkar.

AMAL. Doctor, homoeopath, poet.

VIMAL. Tram, bus, train.

KAMAL. Heat, dirt, mosquitoes.

AMAL. Son, daughter, wife.

VIMAL. Master, driver, chief.

KAMAL. Uncle, niece, mother-in-law.

MANASI. What are they saying?

INDRAJIT. They are talking.

[*Amal, Vimal, Kamal go out, gesticulating silently.*]

MANASI. About what?

INDRAJIT. I don't know. Ask the Writer.

MANASI. [*To the Writer.*] Is there nothing besides that?

WRITER. There should be—there must be!

[*To the audience.*] Don't you think there is anything to talk about besides that? No? Then what should one write? A play with such stuff? Who will produce it? Who'll see it?

[*Indrajit and Manasi start to go out.*]

Indrajit, wait a bit.

[*Indrajit comes back. Exit Manasi.*]

Tell me one thing before you go.

INDRAJIT. What?

WRITER. Where is Manasi?

INDRAJIT. You saw her a moment ago.

WRITER. Not this Manasi. But the Manasi of Hazaribagh.

INDRAJIT. She is in Hazaribagh.

WRITER. Don't you write to her?

INDRAJIT. Sometimes.

WRITER. Do you meet her?

INDRAJIT. Occasionally.

WRITER. Where?

INDRAJIT. In that park. Under that tree.

WRITER. Do you talk?

INDRAJIT. Yes.

WRITER. About what?

INDRAJIT. The same things as usual. About me and her.

WRITER. As usual? The sort of things Amal, Vimal and Kamal were saying?

[*No answer.*]

What Indrajit?

[*He enters the park. Manasi is sitting there under the same old tree.*]

MANASI. Say something.

INDRAJIT. What?

MANASI. Whatever you were going to say.

INDRAJIT. What was that?

MANASI. About yourself, about your family.

INDRAJIT. Oh yes! My wife looks after the house. I work in the office. My wife goes to a film. I go with her. My wife goes to her parents' house. I eat in a restaurant. She comes back. I go marketing.

MANASI. What is all this, Indrajit?

INDRAJIT. Life at home. You wanted to hear about it.

MANASI. I don't want to hear all this.

INDRAJIT. Then what do you want to know?

MANASI. About you.

INDRAJIT. Me? I walk between the rails of the railway line. It's a straight line. I look back—the iron rails meet in a point far

away. I look ahead—the same two iron rails meet in a point far away. The further I move the more the points move too. What is behind is ahead. There is no distance between the past and the future. What's there in the past is in the future as well.

MANASI. Then?

INDRAJIT. I used to hope for the arrival of the train.

MANASI. What would happen then?

INDRAJIT. I would jump off or run or at least fall under it. Do something. But nothing happens. Because no train runs on those rails. I have found that out. Sometimes I think . . .

[Pause.]

MANASI. Yes?

INDRAJIT. I think I must stop. Not walk any further. Sleep on the track.

MANASI. [Pause.] How is that possible, Indrajit?

INDRAJIT. And why not?

MANASI. You have to walk the road.

INDRAJIT. I have been walking all these years.

MANASI. You have to go on walking.

INDRAJIT. I'm tired.

MANASI. You will have to go on.

INDRAJIT. But why? Why? Why? The same old road . . . I walk and walk and walk. Keep on walking. And yet is there no escape?

MANASI. No. There is no escape.

WRITER. No, there's no 'scape

And yet,

There's no 'scape.

Hungry mornings. Wakeful nights.

Shattered days. Bitter hours.

I am. Even today.

Alive. Awake. And remembering.

There's more left,

More of this life.

What I was, I still am,

Will be, beyond,

Far, far away,
Being more and more and more
It's all me—it's all I am.
And yet,
There's no escape.
I fly on the wings of fatigue
In a stupor of winged rest
My childhood flies,
And rises and dips,
And floats . . .
Fragments of time past.
I whirl in the wheel of work
I blow up balloons
With empty words.
I fill the grottoes with heavy echoes
And yet,
There's no escape.
You know me well.
You know all of me,
All the words of music,
Of crashing cymbals
All the dazzling lights
Sick with drunkenness
You know the multicoloured shroud
That covers the rotting corpse,
You know all that's there before
Is only a garland
Of flowers that have been
You know I end here
I'm dead.
Within me.
And yet why do I insist
That I go on?
For there is—Oh! yet there is
No escape!

INDRAJIT. But why?

MANASI. One has to carry on.

INDRAJIT. Why does one have to carry on? What is there beyond the path? Why should I carry on?

MANASI. Why does everyone carry on?

INDRAJIT. Everyone?

[*Amal enters. Sees the Writer.*]

WRITER. Hello! Amal. Where are you off to?

AMAL. I've to take an exam.

WRITER. An exam? At your age?

AMAL. Well, it's an exam arranged by the Institute of Bettermanship! I tried last year—but failed. Let's see this time—one more chance. This time I've even taken a correspondence course!

WRITER. What use is the Diploma?

AMAL. Use? Brother, every use. If I get the Associate Membership of the Institute, no one can stop my promotion. I may even become the Manager. Well, I must be off. I'm getting late.

[*Goes. Vimal comes in.*]

WRITER. Hello! Vimal. Where are you off to?

VIMAL. I am trying to get a cement permit. You know, if one does not grease the palms, the files just don't move.

WRITER. What's the cement for?

VIMAL. I'm building a house. I have taken some land under the C.I.T. scheme. The reserve price is six and a half thousand. In the auction it went up to nine thousand, eight hundred and fifty. That's just for the land, mind you. After that how much would be for the house, do you think? Government loan, Insurance loan, Employment Credit loan—I took them all—but the house doesn't rise beyond its second floor.

WRITER. Then why do you have to build it right now?

VIMAL. What else would you do? No one cares for the rupee any more. If one builds a house now, one will have a roof over one's head in old age. Besides one has to think of one's children. But I'm getting late. . . . Goodbye.

[*Vimal goes off. Kamal comes in.*]

WRITER. Hello! Kamal. Where are you off to?

KAMAL. I've to see Shyamal at his office. He has got hold of a

financier. One must have a bash at persuading him. . . .

WRITER. Persuade him to do what?

KAMAL. Well, you see. We've got hold of an excellent business scheme. Absolutely fool-proof. There will be no difficulty about the import licence. Assembling will be easy. The demand is expanding. The goods won't even reach the market—all booked in advance! The difficulty is about the capital, you see. Shyamal and I have collected a little, but it's nowhere near enough. Even at fifteen per cent interest no money is forthcoming.

WRITER. Then don't go in for it!

KAMAL. But, my dear fellow, what will I eat? This is my work.

By God's grace, I have six children. I spent a thousand on my daughter's illness. The second boy failed in the exam—so that was a net loss of a year's fees. How long can one go on like this? Anyway I can't stay long here. Goodbye.

[*Kamal goes out, along with the Writer.*]

INDRAJIT. Everyone! This is everyone! Amal, Vimal and Kamal.

MANASI. Still they carry on. . . .

INDRAJIT. Manasi, they are happy. They have something to look forward to. A hope—an ambition—a dream—

MANASI. You don't?

INDRAJIT. No.

MANASI. Didn't you ever have one?

INDRAJIT. Oh yes, I had. I was myself then. I had accepted that I had to do something. Didn't know what, but something unusual, important, unprecedented. I used to dream then of coming up like a shooting star shattering the sky into shivers—coming up filling the sky with light from one corner to another—coming up and up until the fire in one burnt down to ashes and only a momentary flame remained in the sky. . . .

MANASI. Are you burnt to ashes now?

INDRAJIT. Oh no! The light never came. The sky didn't burn. I could not leave the solid earth.

MANASI. Why not?

INDRAJIT. I didn't have it in me to do that. Never did. I just dreamt that I could, that's all. So long as I couldn't accept my

ordinariness I dreamt. Now I accept it.

MANASI. Indrajit. . .

INDRAJIT. No, Manasi, don't call me Indrajit, please don't. I am Nirmal. Amal, Vimal, Kamal and Nirmal. Amal, Vimal, Kamal and Nirmal. . .

[Walks downstage repeating this line. The Writer comes and stands behind him. Manasi remains seated.]

WRITER. Indrajit. . .

INDRAJIT. You must be mistaken. I am Nirmal Kumar Ray.

WRITER. Don't you recognize me, Indrajit?

INDRAJIT. Who are you? . . . The Writer?

WRITER. I can't finish the play, Indrajit. . .

INDRAJIT. What's the point of finishing it? It won't ever get completed. Its end is its beginning. . .

WRITER. Yet one has to write.

INDRAJIT. It's your job to write. So write away. What have I to do with it? I am Nirmal.

WRITER. But you are not looking for promotion—or building a house—or developing a business scheme. How can you be Nirmal?

INDRAJIT. But. . . but I'm just an ordinary man.

WRITER. That does not make you Nirmal. I am ordinary too—common! Yet I am not Nirmal. You and I can't be Nirmals.

INDRAJIT. Then how shall we live?

WRITER. Walk! Be on the road! For us there is only the road. We shall walk. I know nothing to write about—still I shall have to write. You have nothing to say—still you will have to talk. Manasi has nothing to live for—she will have to live. For us there is only the road—so walk on. We are the cursed spirits of Sisyphus. We have to push the rock to the top—even if it just rolls down.

INDRAJIT. Must we, even when we know?

WRITER. Yes, we must, even when we know. We have no hope because we know the future. Our past is one with our future. We know what's behind us will also be ahead of us.

INDRAJIT. Must we still live?

WRITER. We must, we must, we must. We must live. We must walk. We know no sacred places. Yet we must go on with the pilgrimage. . . There's no respite.

[Manasi comes and stands between the two. They look out in the distance at the horizon. The stage gets dark—except for a single ray of light which lights them up. They intone together.]

And hence
 There's no end.
 There's no hope
 Of fulfilment
 By the holy shrine
 At journey's end.
 Forget the questions
 Forget the grief,
 And have faith
 In the road—
 The endless road.
 No shrine for us
 No God for us
 But the road,
 The endless road.

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