

## Santiniketan: Learning from a Way of Life

ASHA MUKUL DAS  
(1902-1971)

Tagore's Santiniketan is undoubtedly one of the greatest experiments in holistic, value oriented education in the twentieth century, unaffiliated to any organized religion. The author writes of his stay there during the second decade of the century, of the idyllic simplicity, the friendliness and fun, the learning to be responsible without imposed discipline, of the living in harmony with nature, with one another, with the silence within, with the mystery of creation, of the creative informality of the activities in the *ashram*, of how Tagore's *Dakghar* got staged and songs got written and added on even while the performance was on, of how the entire flow of life around was integrated and woven into the web of relationships that tied together Tagore, his family of teachers and students and the place. Values were imbibed from the atmosphere of the place. The place left its indelible stamp upon all who lived there.

—Ed.

Many years have passed since Gurudev left us. Much has been said about him and much more will be said in the years to come. And yet, will any one be able to see him in full? See this grand, versatile genius in all his facets? I think, 'No.'

I shall, therefore, instead of trying to portray his picture, try to narrate my own feelings, while I was with him.

It was my father who wished that I should be sent to Santiniketan and get my education there. I was the youngest son and, as such, my mother's pet child. She did not approve the idea of sending me away from home.

But it was not to be. My father's wish was to be fulfilled. That year I lost my father and the next year I lost my mother too. And Gurudev gave me shelter at Santiniketan.

It was from Mulu, the youngest son of Sri Ramananda Chatterjee, that I came to know about my going to Santiniketan. We were great friends. One evening Mulu asked me, "Going to Santiniketan?" "I don't

know." "Yes, you are going. I am going too. It will be grand." "Yes, but who told you?" "Yes, I know. My father told me." It was sometime in the middle of June, about a month after the death of my mother, that we were talking thus.

### *Arrival*

So at about one o'clock on a late June night, I was awakened with a startling push, from my deep sleep on a hard wooden bench in a third class railway compartment. "Hei! Hei! Get up, get up, Bolpur is come. Train won't stop here for more than two minutes." And before I could rub off my sleep, the sweet announcement, B..O..L..P..U..R.., by some railway porter reached my ears. And with that typical screeching sound of breaking iron-wheels and with not-a-very-mild jerk, the train stopped still. Hardly had we come out of our compartment on to the platform with our luggage, when the train puffed out of the station; her red tail-lamp gradually fading on the distant rail.

So this is Gurudev's Bolpur, where he has his institution—Santiniketan. One by one we came out of the station and gathered below the big Banyan tree—which, though it still stands there, stood much more majestically in those days!

A bullock cart was waiting. On inquiry from our revered teacher—Nepal Chandra Roy—the cartman came forward and said that the cart was sent to take us to Santiniketan. On further inquiry we came to know that Gurudev had left for Calcutta and would return after his work there was finished. We all got into the well-cushioned (cushioned with hay over which a durree was spread) cart with our luggage and the man in charge of the cart jumped on to his seat and made a peculiar sound. It was obviously a language of mutual understanding between the man and the two huge white bullocks. For as soon as they heard it, they started running. And so suddenly did they start, that under the hood of the cart, our heads collided. Obviously we enjoyed this unwarranted collision of heads and the swift run of the cart, for we began to giggle.

I still remember how beautiful was that moonlit night; how quiet and how bracing the cool breeze!

We crossed a huge field and reached a grove, with bamboo-bushes all around and a few very big trees. There was a small 'All-You-Want' village-shop there and an earthen lamp was still burning at that hour or the night on its high mud-verandah. That grove was practically the

gateway to Santiniketan. Our cart crossed this place and we were again in a vast field and on our left was a big bund (a water tank) with mounds of red moorum soil all around it. Quite a few tall palm trees were standing in a line on the opposite side of the bund.

We were moving northward and beyond that bund on the same side of the road was Neechu Bangla—which means Low Bungalow. Here lived the revered saint and great philosopher—Dwijendra Nath Tagore, Gurudev's eldest brother.

After going about two or three furlongs, our cart left the road and entered a narrow lane to the left, and passing by the side of a few huts here and there, it stopped in a field—more or less like a quadrangle with long barracks on its north and south ends. It must have been past 2. A.M. when we got down from the cart at the quadrangle.

And so this was Santiniketan. I liked the place at first sight. Be it two o'clock at night, I did not grudge the sleepless cart-journey, for I liked it. I liked it from the very Bolpur station right upto the place I reached and beyond it too. I loved it.

The *ashram* was quiet. The inmates were fast asleep. And we felt that we had no right to disturb this quietude. The cartman quietly carried our luggage to a dormitory and as quietly left us. A boy, who too came with us from Calcutta, showed me an empty bedstead and whispered to me to spread my bed over it and sleep. He further whispered that *pucca* arrangement would be made next day. To-day I recall those things and compare them with today's affairs and wish to heave out a sigh and ask, "Where are you going my brothers of my motherland?" The author of the institution was absent, and yet everything was moving, as if automatically, and in harmony too.

Early morning at four o'clock there was a long spell of ding dong bell. And everyone, from the tiny tot to the big boys, got up leaving their beds and, with a tin-mug or lota, went out and vanished in the darkness. Yes, outside it was still dark. My sleep was disturbed and I did not know what to do. Then after seeing that all the boys had gone, a boy—the captain of the dormitory—came to me and inquired, "New boy?" I nodded. He said sympathetically, "You sleep now. From tomorrow, when you know, you too go out."

So the winder has wound the clock and it runs smoothly in tune. And so has this big universe with its millions of suns and planets and stars been set in tune by ONE. In rhythm it runs and in harmony too. My gurudev—Rabindranath Tagore—was a disciple of that ONE; From Him alone he took his initiation. He followed His instructions only.

And that is why he became his Master's man. And he knew what ought to be the "religion of man". And he tried to infuse that religion in each and everyone of us—his students at Santiniketan.

That day I knew which was my seat, in which dormitory, in which Vibhag, and which class I should attend for which subject. (Readers may wonder, but it is a fact that while I attended third class—class VIII in modern terminology—for other subjects, being weak in Sanskrit, I attended Sanskrit class with the fourth class—class VII—boys and being comparatively strong in English and Mathematics, I attended periods for these subjects with the boys of the second class—Class IX.

Thus early in the morning we used to go out to the fields, wash, and return to our seats. Here we arranged and tidied our respective corner. Turn by turn we swept our wards and thus the whole dormitory remained neat and clean every day. After this we took our bath in the open. There was a big pucca well around which there were a number of *choubachchas* (concrete water reservoirs). These were filled by a man and two bullocks constantly by means of a leather-bag and a rope.

### *Silence*

The bell rang again. The entire *ashram* at once became silent. Not only the boys—but teachers, servants, cooks all stopped talking at once—as if a magic wand had been waved. Cooks and servants carried on their work—but stopped talking. Boys, and even the teachers, if they had not finished with their bath as yet, hurriedly finished it and quietly ran to their rooms without any utterance. This was prayer time. And we moved out with our *asans* and sat wherever we wished. We were expected to pray, to concentrate our minds and think according to our beliefs. No one came to preach. These ten minutes gradually became a precious time to us, the effect of which is still dominating. After this individual silent sitting, we used to assemble at one particular place and recite together the vedic hymn, *Om Pita-Nohsi-Pita noh bodhi* etc. Usually this time used to synchronise with sunrise. Gurudev, when in the *ashram*, joined us in this congregational recitation in the early years of the *ashram*.

After this chorus recitation, we used to return to our rooms, but yet we could not talk to each other till another bell rang. This bell called us to assemble in the Quadrangle. Dormitory-wise all the *ashram* dwellers used to group and stand in line. Gurudev used to come to see us with his own eyes and to make enquiries. If any of us was ill, the

boys would take him to the hospital and leave him in charge of Jogen Babu, the Doctor. Gurudev used to visit this place too, off and on. And with his wonderful talk, full of wit and humour he used to keep the inmates amused and gay. Naturally, when ill, we felt homesick. But his visits made us forget home completely and we did not miss it at all.

### *Meals, Classes & Games*

Now, from the general line in the Quadrangle, we used to go to the kitchen to have our breakfast, which used to vary every day. We had to carry our own utensils and sit in line. The cook used to serve the food and after we finished it, we used to go to the tap or well, wash our utensils and carry them back to our seats.

Then started the class hours and we, with our books and *asans* went to our respective classes. Teachers had their different places, where we gathered and spread our *asans* by their *asans*. Jagadananda Babu had his class by the side of a gate on which flower-creepers climbed. Nepal Babu had his class at Amrakunja (mango-grove). Gurudev, when in the *ashram*, used to hold his class about fifty to sixty yards to the south of Jagadananda Babu's class. In his class, every one was welcome—be he a teacher, or a very young student. Discipline was everywhere maintained in Santiniketan.

After a few periods of study, again we approached the kitchen with our utensils in hand, and had our lunch; and after washing our utensils we went back to our dormitory and were allowed to do whatever we wished. Some of us went to bed, some prepared their lessons, some gossiped. There was no one to say anything. We again had our classes from 2 p.m.; and this time only three periods were conducted, out of which, one was of classical music held by Pandit Bhimrao Shastri.

After the class hours, again we had tiffin, and after tiffin, games. At this time all had to go out of their rooms. There was football and other games too. Santiniketan, at our time, had a very strong team in football. Every year we used to annex many soccer trophies. On many days the winning team had returned with a shield or a big cup to Bolpur station and there had been welcomed by a few *ashramites* and then come all the way singing the *ashram* anthem and displaying the trophy. Once in my time, the Mohanbagan team of Calcutta came to Santiniketan to play a friendly match with us. This was of course arranged by Gour Da (Gour Gopal Ghosh) of ours, who was himself a footballer and, as far as I remember, played as half back for

Mohanbagan in 1911 at the I.F.A. Shield tournament, when for the first time an Indian football team won the trophy by defeating Gordon Highlanders—a European military team. In this match between Mohanbagan and Santiniketan, the result was a draw. Of course in these friendly matches between the visitors and the *ashram* team, the main charm of the visitors was the after-match entertainment with Gurudev in their midst. The Presidency College team too used to come almost every year from Calcutta.

Those who did not play football, either played something else or sat by the ground and watched the game or went out for a walk.

Mulu had opened a school for the Santhal children of the adjacent Santhal village. Mulu, Vijaykrishna Vasu (a South Indian boy) and myself were the three teachers in his school. And this was the time when we used to teach them. Mulu used to procure small prizes for his students at his own cost. He supplied sweets and toffees too to serve as attractions for his pupils, for the pupils did not seem to have as much charm for their lessons as for the sweets. Mulu supplied them with slates, pencils, books and all that he thought was necessary. After his untimely death, the school has been working as Prasad Naisha Vidyalaya, after his name.

#### *Evening prayer & Tagore songs*

After the games, those of us who wished, took bath and again we went out with our *asans* for our evening prayer. Again the whole *ashram* went silent for ten minutes and then again assembled at the same place to recite another Vedic hymn,—

*Om yo deva agnau; yo apsu, — yo vishwambhubanamavivesha yo oshadhishu, yoo vanaspatishu tasmai devaya namo namah.*

(The God who is in fire, and in water, who is insouled in the entire universe, who is in medicinal herbs, and plants and trees, to that God we bow.)

Then, after the bell rang, we talked again. After this time, we used to go to Dinu Da's (Dinendra Nath Tagore) house, where he used to teach Gurudev's songs (Ravindra Sangeet). This class was never compulsory and yet the charm of this particular class was so great, that when unwell, even from the hospital, we came to join this class. Here we used to learn songs fresh from the Piper. Gurudev was a great musician himself. In my time, the Maharaja of Phithapuram in South

India sent his court musician, a great *veenkar*, to the *ashram*, for Gurudev, several times. He used to stay for months, and play on his *veena* to Gurudev. When composing a song, first the tune used to come to Gurudev. Then he fitted appropriate words of his the-then feelings to that tune and perfected his song. This was the time when, the man he needed, most was Dinu Da, to whom he has dedicated his symbolical drama—*Phalguni*. In its dedication Dinu Da has been qualified as ‘Store-keeper of all my tunes, the ferryman of all my songs’, “Amar Sakal surer bhandari’ Amar sakal ganer kandari” by Gurudev. Dinu Da was a wonderful teacher too. Dinu Da had no children. He had a tame deer, of whom he was very fond. One day, the deer was missing. We searched for it in all possible corners but did not find it. But from the clues received, we became almost sure that the Santhals had made a feast of it. Dinu Da was deeply grieved and so was Kamala Bouthan, his wife. Gurudev heard about it and in the evening he came to Dinu Da’s house with the famous song:

“*Se kon boner harin chhilo amar mane,*” (‘what forest deer dwelt in my mind’). Thus he made Dinu Da’s deer immortal and soothed Dinu Da wonderfully. For, the very same evening we learnt the song from Dinu da.

The boys who did not join this music class either studied or managed to get hold of a teacher or some senior student and sitting around him listened to some fairy tale or some interesting story till the bell rang for dinner.

After dinner, we could sit and chat or study for about one hour more, till the gong announced bed-time. Lights were put out. Boys as well as teachers took to bed. At this time about a dozen or more of us used to gather near Jagadanand Babu’s class. Therefrom we started and went all round the *ashram* singing some song of Gurudev. We used to be called *Vaitaliks*. Our duty was to sing lullaby to the ashramites as well as to wake them up by singing at early dawn, before the bell rang to wake them.

Sunday was not a holiday at Santiniketan. But in its place, Wednesday was. On this day there was no class. On this day during prayer hours both in the morning as well as in the evening, instead of silent individual prayer and recitation of hymns in chorus, we used to go to the Mandir. There were psalms of Gurudev’s own composition, which we, the *ashram* Choir, used to sing. And Gurudev with all the dignity of a *rishi*, both in his appearance as well as in his true aspect, used to

take the seat of the minister and pray and deliver his sermon. The famous book—Santiniketan—is nothing but a collection of his sermons given by him from time to time. These were taken down by Santosh Da (Santosh Chandra Mazumdar) and Hablu Da (Pradyot Kumar Sengupta) and may be some others too. Of course the scripts were shown to Gurudev, who corrected them before publication.

The *mandir* of Santiniketan is beautiful. Its walls and doors are all made of glass, and the floor, of marble. The steps too are of marble.

### *Freedom, Excursions & Fun*

Students of Santiniketan had full freedom. Gurudev sanctioned it and told them that he hoped that nothing wrong would be done by them as they possessed their sense of *vichar* (reasoning). And as they knew what was right and what was wrong, there should be no occasion to necessitate the withdrawal of this privilege. It never became necessary.

Students were divided into three groups. Elders belonged to *Adya Vibhag*. Tiny tots upon ten or so (don't exactly remember) belonged to the *Sishu Vibhag*. The rest, in between, belonged to *Madhya Vibhag*. Each *vibhag* had separate dormitories—numbers being according to necessity. *Sishu Vibhag* had *Satish Kutir* and *Mohit Kutir*. Later *Satya Kutir* was built to meet the demand. Still later, still another—*Shamindra Kutir*—was built. At one time, one of these *kutirs* had double bunks to accommodate double number of students in the same floor area.

Each *kutir* had one or two teachers living in it. The teachers had nothing extra—no separate room—but the same one bedstead and a shelf or a table to keep books. They were to look after the boys. They were so friendly that there was no question of fearing them. On the contrary we used to run to them for everything. If we had need, we could have asked them to come and join us in our games. They used to chat with us, play with us, laugh with us, join us in our picnics, walks, and what not. After the anniversary of 7<sup>th</sup> Paush, we used to go out for excursions. Different batches used to go to different places. We had teachers with us in every batch. Once we went to Libpur-of course on foot and not by train. Cooks and servants went ahead with rations and cooking utensils in bullock carts. We went on foot and Santosh Da was our guide. Full instructions were given to the advance party. Where to pitch the tent and what to do ahead, everything was told before hand to them. At about one o'clock in the afternoon we

reached there. Food was not ready and the advance party of cooks and servants were scolded by Santosh Da. Of course some tiffin and sweets and *muri* (puffed rice) was immediately served. Then while the food was being prepared, we were taken to see the silk industry works from cottage to cottage. After this we went back, took bath at a lake and took our meal. Before the sun went down, we left for the next destination. Through the paddy fields we went at some one's suggestion, thinking it would be a shorter route. But we reached much later—at about nine in the night, much after our scheduled time. There we were to be guest of the zamindar. It was pre-arranged. But the zamindar perhaps forgot to issue orders to his staff in charge of his guest house. When we arrived at the guest house, dead tired and hungry, the man in charge was not there; and from the enquiries I made I could understand that there was something wrong somewhere. So on the floor, making a pillow of the bundle of clothes with me, I slept. I don't know what the time was when we were awakened, but I could hear the cook saying, "Alas, I didn't know—now only *loochi* with sugar the poor children have to take." I grabbed the hot *loochies* with sugar on them. The taste was unique and even now, whenever I get hot *loochi*, I take one at least with only sugar to revive the taste of those *loochies*. But I must admit that, that taste I have not found again. Only for Santosh Da we got it, for he vehemently opposed their preparing dal and other things for us and insisted only on *loochi* and sugar (which needed not much preparation, knowing fully well that it would be late and we were very hungry).

Usually we went out for about a fortnight. Some batch used to go to Kenduli (from Kenduvilwa) village, the birth place of the *Vaishnav* poet Joydev. Once a batch of twelve went to see the hot water spring at Bakkeswar, pretty far from Santiniketan. This batch had to face many difficulties, yet they went and returned. All these batches, when they returned to the *ashram*, narrated their experiences. And Gurudev also used to be present in those *sabhas* (meetings). After he heard their experiences, with his usual humour he said, "All right, let us from today call you all, Dwadash Bakkeswar" (the Twelve Tall Talkers). The whole gathering burst out laughing. Those twelve were at once being hailed, "Hullo Dwadash Bakkeswar". Poor batch-members, they did not know whether they should feel glad and proud or not.

Keyaphool is a wonderful monsoon flower. But to get it from the shrub is hard job, because of the fine thorns all over, both on the

margins as well as on the ridge of the leaves, and on the petals of the flower too. Here Nepal Babu was an asset to the party going to gather *keya*. None was so expert at climbing the tree and plucking the flowers. After he used to get down from the plant, we had to pull out the thorns sticking on his bald head.

Jagadananda Babu looked a very grave and angry man. But in the evening, when he used to join in a rehearsal or when he played on his violin, his eyes smiled and glittered with love for us.

On full-moon nights the ashramites used to gather in the quadrangle and have fun. Some sang songs, some recited, some played and when Gurudev used to be there, he used to conduct the programme which he then and there chalked out. And these programmes were always full of fun and amusement.

### *Students' Court*

The new-moon nights were of a more serious nature as the business meetings were held on those nights. Students used to hold their meetings and discuss all the various business of the *ashram* and their problems. Students' court, which was called *Vichar Sabha*, was held on these nights. Here the students were the judges, they were the juries too, they were the plaintiffs as well as the culprits. If any student had anything to complain of, he submitted his complaint to the ward-captain. If the ward captain could meet his grievances, well and good, or else he (ward-captain) consulted the room captain. If even he failed, the case moved on to the *Vichar Sabha*.

That reminds me of a very amusing incident. Mulu was staying in a dormitory at that time. One day, when the waking bell rang ding dong at 4 o'clock in the morning, when it always used to be dark, all the boys left their beds and went out to perform their ablution. The captain of the room noticed that one boy who did not leave his bed was still sleeping. The boy was no one else but Mulu. The captain went up to him and ordered him to get up and go out. But Mulu did not leave his bed and went on making sounds, 'Ooh'—'Aah'-etc. The captain knew Mulu very well. He asked, "What's wrong? Are you not well?" Mulu continued his sounds. The captain naturally suspected that Mulu was pretending. So he told him, "If you don't get up, you have got to show me the slip"—meaning the note from the doctor, confirming his illness. Mulu nodded and agreed. The captain left him and went

out. Mulu had his sleep to his satisfaction and was laughing in his sleeves all the time. When challenged by the captain again to produce the doctor's slip, he said, "Bah, I have already shown you the sleep." The captain got furious but Mulu went on laughing and saying, "I have shown you the sleep, and you can't deny it." The captain thought that Mulu had ignored and disobeyed him. So he sent his case up to the *Vichar-Sabha* and on the next new-moon night Mulu was summoned. He appeared before the court. Asked the judge, "Why don't you obey your captain? Why do you ignore him?" Mulu replied, "But I do obey him. Why should I ignore him?" After the captain narrated the whole incident, he said with a smile, "But didn't I obey you? Didn't you ask me to show you the slip?" And didn't I show you the sleep?" Then he looked at the judge and giggled and said again, "I showed it till the prayer bell sounded, ask him." And he giggled again. That particular laugh of his was very contagious—for every one in the bench of the juries, as well as the judge himself, started laughing. Mulu's mischievous laugh and his smiling eyes won him the day. The captain was requested by the wise judge to appreciate Mulu's wit and humour and forget all about it. Also Mulu was requested not to show sleep after the waking bell any more but to help the captain in maintaining the discipline of the *ashram*.

### *Monsoon*

The monsoon always started at Santiniketan with grandeur and gorgeousness. One day when we were having an afternoon class with Suren Babu, it started raining heavily. And, though the class was being taken indoors on the floor above the library, we wanted to enjoy the rain, by getting drenched in it. We were let off. Out in the field, we ran into and started enjoying the rain. Our enjoyment was increased ten-folds, when we saw Gurudev too coming from the side of the *Dehali* (name of the house where he stayed in those days). We practically started jumping and dancing around him. He too was obviously enjoying the rain and said, "Now, what can we do?" After a few suggestions and counter-suggestions, it was decided that we should now go to the *khowai* (ditches formed by the flowing water cutting its way to the river) and by being pushed by the rushing water we would soon reach Kopai (a river at the north of Santiniketan flowing from west to east). So we did. It was really great fun. When we reached

*khowai*, the water was rushing at great speed, though it was only knee deep. The rain had ceased and we just left ourselves in the current and the rest was being done by it. As I relaxed in the current, like pebbles I had to roll at its mercy. Once I had to gulp some water too and yet it was great fun. We were all the while being taken care of by the older boys. Once a low half-submerged date palm tree, which grew by the side of the *khowai* transversely first and then obliquely upward, was so close to me, (and I was so unmindful to that as my whole attention was fixed only on what Gurudev was saying) that had Gurudev not pulled me towards him at the very nick of time my head would have banged against that tree. We went right upto the confluence with River Kopai, and then a little further down the Kopai along its right bank and near the railway bridge on the Kopai, we left the water and returned to the *ashram* singing. The moorum soil that was being carried by the water running through the *khowai* coloured all our clothes *gerua* (brick brown colour)—and we all looked like *chelas* (disciples) of a *sannyasi*; of course Gurudev himself looked like a *sannyasi*, his *jobba* too being coloured *gerua*.

Some times we used to go with him to Parul Ban, a beauty spot of the vicinity, and a wonderful picnicking spot too. We used to spend a few hours there and then return singing. Some of our favourite lines were:

*Jabo na aj ghare re bhai,*  
*Jabo na aj ghare*  
*O re akash bhenge bahirke aj*  
*Nebo re loot kore.*

(We shall not return home today, O brother  
 We shall not return home today.  
 We shall plunder the sky & hug  
 The world without  
 Near to our hearts)

*Aj Parul didir bane mora chalbo nimantrane..etc.*  
 (To Sister Parul's woodland  
 We are invited to go today)

Gurudev did not want us to be bookworms. He wanted us to enjoy nature in full and learn more from nature. Perhaps that is why he opened his Santiniketan in the very lap of nature.

*Bravery*

One day, while he was taking a class, he suddenly asked the boys, "Which of you are brave? I should like to test your bravery." No one wished to be known as a coward, particularly by Gurudev. So everybody said that he was brave. Then Gurudev said, "Look, yonder on the road to Bolpur, on the other side of the *bund*, there is a big tree, below which they have buried a body this morning. I have seen that with my own eyes. Now who can go alone tonight at 12 o'clock to fetch a twig from that tree. The tree is the only one of its kind there." The enthusiasm was not so great this time. Yet, one student, Buni by name, a wonderful singer, pock marks all over his face, said, "I can, Gurudev. Of course I will take a hurricane-lamp and a *lathi* (stick) with me." Gurudev, with an admiring look, said, "Can you? All right. Well then, Sadhu will wake you up at 12 tonight. He will give you the stick and the lighted lantern." So everything went according to programme. Buni did it—and at that hour of night, he did not know before hand that Gurudev had kept others near by for any emergency. Thus Gurudev encouraged us. Once a tiger came in the vicinity of Surul and started killing calves etc. at the beginning—but later, it took a little boy too from a Santhal village. The commotion was great. Gurudev wanted some of his boys to volunteer to go and kill the tiger. At last his wish was fulfilled. Narabhup Da (Narabhup Rao), a Nepali boy of matric class, with Biren Da (B.M. Sen) and perhaps Mani Gupta Da went and killed the tiger with a *khukri* and *lathi*. The gun that they took from the house of the Zamidar of Raipur village, (i.e. Lord Sinha's house) did not work. However they brought the tiger, the skin of which was tanned and kept in the library. Narabhup Da too was attacked by the tiger and was injured by its teeth and nails. But ultimately Narabhup Da killed it. Gurudev, after hearing the description from them, looked at Narabhup Da with his praising look and said to him in his inimitable way. "*Ki re Narabhup! tui ek too o bhoy peli na? Narabhukhtake swachhande mere phelli?* I say Narabhup, did you not feel the least fear!? With ease you killed the Narabhuk, (eater of men)" Narabhup Da was sent for necessary treatment immediately.

*Dakghar*

After the Puja vacation one year, I was called by the then principal Nepal Chandra Roy. Gurudev was in Calcutta, wherefrom he had

requested, in a letter, to the principal of his institution, asking if he could spare me for some time from the school and send me to Calcutta with Sudha Da (Sudhakanta Roy Choudhary) to take the part of Amal in *Dakghar*. So I was escorted to Calcutta by Sudha Da. At about eleven o'clock at night, we reached Gurudev's house at Jorasanko. The dinner was kept ready for us. And so after having dinner, I went to bed.

From the very next morning, the rehearsal of *Dakghar* or *Post Office* began on the first floor of *Vichitra*. Gurudev himself took the part of *Fakir* or *Sannyasi* and of *Prahari* (watchman). Gaganendra Nath took the role of Madhav Dutta and Abanindranath Tagore that of *Kabiraj* as well as of *Moral*. As both *Moral* and *Kabiraj* had to appear on the stage almost at once in the third act, Abanindranath made a device of his own. He appeared with a *Chela* (disciple), as *Kabiraj* in the first act and said to Madhav Dutta that later on, even if he could not personally come to visit Amal, the ailing child, his disciple would come and do all that was necessary. Artist Devi Prasad Roy Chowdhury took the role of this *Chela*. Santosh Kumar Mitra took the part of the curd-seller for a day or two I think; for later on Asit Da (Asit Kumar Haldar) took the role. Sudha was Abanindranath's daughter, Surupa. Rathindranath became *Rajkaviraj* and Nabu Da (Nabendra Nath Tagore), son of Gaganendra Nath, took the role of *Rajdoot*. If I remember right, Ajin (Ajinandra Nath Tagore), Coca (Trunendra Nath, Abanindranath's son) and Nepu (Soumyendra Nath Tagore's younger brother) took the roles of the boys.

*Dakghar* is a drama without songs. But a few songs were introduced. It started with a back-ground song, *Ami Chanchala Hay, Ami Sudurera piyashi*. (I am restless. I thirst for the far away.) It was a poem. Later it was given a tune for *Dakghar*. The other song that was introduced in the first act was *Hyade go Nandarani*. As far as I remember, it was on the second night of its performance, that Gurudev signalled to me from the wings that the curtain would fall after the first act. Usually that was not done. So, when after the act, the curtain fell, Gurudev called me into the green room and asked me to fetch some paper and a pen or pencil. These being given to him, he sat on the table there and went on singing as well as composing simultaneously, the famous song:

*Bhenge mor gharer chabi niye jabi ke amare.*

(Who will break open the door of my house and take me away?)

He finished the complete song and asked me to sing it then and there from the stage. I felt nervous and hesitated, not being so sure about my picking up the tune with perfection. He did not insist. Hardly ten minutes later, when the curtain rose again, Gurudev himself, in the dress of a *Baul*, sang the song to the audience.

From the next day another role was naturally included—the *baul's* role. Obviously Gurudev took this part too.

When the *baul* had been introduced, why not more songs, so the *baul* had to sing another song,—the extra one being *Gram Chara oi ranga matir path* (The red path leaving the village . . .). And when this song was added, the artist-brothers—Gaganendra Nath and Abanindranath—assisted by Nanda Da (Nanda Lal Bose) immediately had a *ranga matir path* made by means of a red *salu*, in front of the stage, on which the *baul* made his appearance. With the *baul* came a *chela*, who accompanied the music with his flute. And this *chela* was Soumya Da (Soumyendra Nath Tagore).

One day, while rehearsals were on, Nanda Da brought the scene of *Dakghar* sketched on paper and unrolled it on the floor for the approval of Gurudev. I too looked at it. It was the sketch of a temple instead of a post office and yet Gurudev approved it, though later on, I don't know why, it was not used. Later on I thought over the incident and gradually the meaning of *Dakghar* became more and more clear to me. With more and more rehearsals, Gurudev's performances made clear impressions on my mind and the meaning of *Dakghar* became absolutely clear. No one explained it to me, and yet I could realise who is who in *Dakghar*. I realised who were the peons of the post office. I knew who was the Rajdoot and who the Rajkaviraj.

*Dakghar* was staged at a stretch for quite a few days and then again for a few days, after a gap of several days, during *Paush Utsav* at Santiniketan.

To see *Dakghar* came Mahatma Gandhi, Sardar Patel, Sarojini Naidu, Dr Annie Besant and many other leaders of India. After the final drop of the curtain, Gurudev sent me out amidst the audience. He told me, "Go, go out as you are; they want to see you, they are waiting." As soon as I went out some one caught hold of me and took me to Mahatma Ji, who took me in his arms and blessed me. I touched his feet and got up. Others wanted to see me and I had to go.

Yes, *Dakghar* was a grand success. I am glad and feel proud too when I think of it—more so because I could satisfy Gurudev with my performance. Many a time after this the admirers of Gurudev rightly

requested him to perform *Dakghar* again, but Gurudev refused to do it. Little did I know that he still thought of me so tenderly. In 1939, at the request of Indira Di (Smt. Indira Devi Chowdhurani) and others Gurudev assented to stage *Dakghar* again. And as such, parts were distributed and regular rehearsals went on before Gurudev, for quite a long time. Everyone thought that the parts were ready and that the stage could be arranged now and that somebody should go to Calcutta to arrange it, as the performance was to be held at Calcutta. But unless Gurudev said it, they could not proceed further and the rehearsals went on regularly. At last some one had to ask Gurudev if some one should be sent to Calcutta to arrange the stage etc. Gurudev asked him to wait for two days more. Thus after a few postponements he said one day, "I will decide tomorrow." The tomorrow came. Rehearsals were going on. Everyone was looking at his face anxiously awaiting his decision. Suddenly he threw the book from his hand. He made his decision and said in a fit of passion, "No-No! It won't be staged." Every thing everywhere became quiet. No one moved. Gurudev himself too. Then after some time he softly said in a sad tone, addressing particularly the *ashramites*, "You don't know him. There was a boy named...(and he uttered my name). You can't do it as he did. So better leave it." There were *ashramites* who knew me. When they told me of the incident, my eyes filled with tears, but don't know what tears they were.

### 7th of Paush

To go back to the old topic at Santiniketan, the anniversary of 7th *Paush* was near. So the performance of *Dakghar* was stopped, though the stage was not dismantled. I went back to Santiniketan with Gurudev. Seventh day of *Paush* is the day of Maharshi Devendra Nath Tagore's *deeksha* (initiation). There were many visitors. Even now 7th of *Paush* is a great day for the *ashramites*. Prayers are given highest importance. A fair continues for three days with so many attractions such as, *yatra* (theatre without proper stage), *Kabir Larai* (fight between poets in verse), *Baul gan*, (singing by Bauls) indigenous arts and crafts of Birbhum, archery competition (mainly of Santhals—others too may take part), student's tea stalls, Birbhum's *Murabbas* and lastly, fireworks.

At Santiniketan we had our own manuscript magazines, which we used to show to Gurudev. He used to encourage us in every sphere of our activities. He used to be present in our *Sahityasabhas* (literary meets)

and listened to us. He taught us rolling stories. It was great fun. He asked one of us to start a story. After he proceeded for some length, Gurudev stopped him and asked some one else to continue and thus it went on till he asked one to end it. And then he asked the first boy to say what was in his mind—the original idea.

### *Sarodotsab*

Before the vacations, students and teachers staged some drama and after that they left in different groups under the escort of teachers to different destinations.

In 1919, before the Puja vacation, instruction came from Gurudev, then at Calcutta, to start rehearsal for *Sarodotsab*. He added that he was coming soon. Gurudev wanted me to appear in the role of Upananda. It was my matric year. In those days Santiniketan was not recognized by Calcutta University. As such we had to appear as private candidates. And we had to appear in the test examination of some school the University dictated. That year, we were to sit at the test examination of the Howrah Zilla School and that was to be held in early December—just a few weeks after the Puja vacation. As such, when called by Dinu Da for the rehearsal, I begged to be pardoned for not taking part on the ground of having to take an examination. Dinu Da yielded to my request and left me. But after a few days, when Gurudev came back to the *ashram* from Calcutta, and went to the rehearsal, he saw the distribution of cast and then he enquired about me. On hearing from Dinu Da all about it, he sent for me. When I went to him, he looked at me full in the face and told me, "You have got to take the role of Upananda," I silently nodded in agreement. He then called me near, placed his hand on my shoulder and said, "This should not depress you. On the contrary, this will help your studies. For along with studies you need some recreation. And this will be excellent recreation for you." Then with a smile he said again, "I know you will surely get a First division. Don't worry." My looks went right up to his face and with joy it glittered and then I lowered my eye-lids. I knew then that there was nothing in this world to stop me from attaining First division in Matric.

So I regularly attended the rehearsals. But trouble began at my feeling awkward to threaten Jagadananda Babu, my Mathematics teacher, (in the role of Laksheswar) that I (Upananda) would break his teeth with the pestle. Gurudev, with his usual mischief, said, "Look,

what a grand opportunity I have given you! Here is your chance to say it on the stage and before the public! Never lose the chance." Gradually I became bold and said it.

### *Anand Mela*

We used to have *Ananda Mela* (Festival of Joy) every year before a vacation—perhaps summer vacation. (I don't exactly remember). Here students used to have stalls of their own and some sold *sherbats*, some tea and biscuits, some sweets and so on. While I had a *sherbat* stall, Mulu had opened a wonderful stall which he called *Pratnatattwagar*. The entrance was covered with a curtain. And one could enter it on paying one anna. There was heavy rush at the gate, as just outside it, Mulu wrote on a black board:

"Come one —come all  
Rare opportunities  
Rare exhibits."

And there were really so many rare things in his list of exhibits. Some of them I still remember, such as *Ramer Paduka*, (Ram's Sandals), *Seeta devir Padanakhakana*, (A corner of Sita's toe nail), *Buddher Keshapash*, (Buddha's lock of hair), *Kalidaser Lekhani*, (Kalidasa's pen), and so on. Now to all who went in and said, "You are cheating", Mulu, in reply, said, "No, I am not. They are what they are". Gurudev too came to see this stall and smiled. Some wanted proofs; Gurudev supported Mulu, by saying, "Bring some people of their ages, they will verify them". Mulu laughed and said, "I shall prove before closing the stall." And he did prove them satisfactorily. His father's name being Ramanand, he collected his wooden sandals and called them *Ramer Paduka*. His sister Seetadevi's toenails became *Seeta devir Padanakhakana*. Buddhadas was a Ceylonese student from whom he collected a few locks of hair (when he was having a crop), and exhibited them as *Buddher Keshapash*. Dr Kalidas Nag's pen was definitely *Kalidaser Lekhani* and who could deny that?

### *Departures*

Mulu went to Calcutta, where, in September he died suddenly of tetanus. The news came to me as a rude shock. I lost my friend from whom two days before his death, I had received a postcard, in his

usual humorous way. He wrote that he was coming to Santiniketan, to take me back to Calcutta during the Puja vacation.

After the Puja vacation we prepared for the test and in December, we went to Calcutta to appear in the examination. My days in Santiniketan were now ending as I decided to sit for my final examination at the Calcutta centre.

So one day at about 2 p.m., again with my bags, I went to the Bolpur station and got into a third class compartment of a Calcutta-bound train. Many a time I had left for Calcutta from Bolpur Railway station before this; but never did I feel the pang of separation as I felt this time. On other occasions I knew that I was coming back but now I did not know where my destiny was leading me, and I did not know when I would return to Santiniketan or whether I would return there at all.

Vijay Vasu, the south Indian student, who was one of the three teachers of Mulu's School, came to the Bolpur station to see me off. Mulu had already left and left us forever. And now we too were parting.

The guard of the train blew his whistle and fluttered the green flag. The train started moving. The gap between Vijay Basu standing on the platform and me leaning out of the window grew wider and wider. Suddenly his face looked blurred. The train swerved near the distant signal and I could see him no more.

I withdrew from the window and sat on my seat. The engine gave a longdrawn whistle, asking for the 'All Right Signal' from the guard of the train. The guard leaned out of the brake-van door and waved his green flag. This was the 'All Right Signal'. It meant that every thing was all right with the train. But something was not quite all right with at least one passenger in it—and that I am definite of, even to this day.