Jatindranath Sen Gupta (1887-1954) was one of the two or three poets of the twenties who broke with the overpowering tradition of Tagore's poetry. In his use of a racy, home-spun diction close to the spoken idiom, in the ratiocinative frame of his verse with a rich interplay of jest and strongly felt emotion, he was a highly distinctive poet, who explored new directions in Bengali poetry.

A painstaking craftsman, he wrote sparingly and even in his lifetime never reached a wide audience for reasons not entirely literary. In the thirties he was hailed by certain critics as an atheist and they deplored the shift in the tone and accent in his later poetry as a retreat to traditional faith. In this monograph the author has argued that the poet had never been an atheist and the shift in his later poetry meant a lowering of his voice and a new response to the kindly face of life hitherto unnoticed. A strong apprehension of suffering continued to be the core of his experience till the end of his poetic career.

Dr. Sunil Kanti Sen, the eldest son of the poet, taught English literature at [illegible] pur. He has recently written [illegible] short biography of the poet publ[illegible] 'Bangiya Sahitya Parishad'.

Cover layout : Satyajit Ray
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Jatindranath Sen Gupta

Sunil Kanti Sen

JATINDRANATH SEN GUPTA

The sculpture reproduced on the end paper depicts a scene where three soothsayers are interpreting to King Suddhodana the dream of Queen Maya, mother of Lord Buddha. Below them is seated a scribe recording the interpretation. This is perhaps the earliest available pictorial record of the art of writing in India.

From Nagarjunkonda, 2nd century A.D.

Courtesy: National Museum, New Delhi.

MAKERS OF INDIAN LITERATURE

JATINDRANATH SEN GUPTA

SUNIL KANTI SEN

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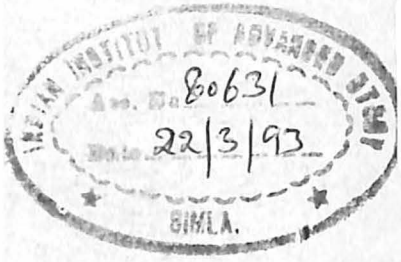

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Preface

It was a happy coincidence that the official request to write this monograph came to me when a small group of discerning admirers of Jatindranath Sen Gupta had just started some homework on the commemoration of the poet's birth centenary in 1987. Since the seventies, interest in Jatindranath's poetry has been rather casual for reasons not entirely literary. His poetry has a very distinctive character which deserves a closer look. Jatindranath was not a prolific writer and even in his lifetime never reached a wide audience. Perhaps he preferred it that way. His aversion to all kinds of public relations can be traced to a certain quiet, self-assured dignity, a very pronounced trait in his character. An ardent lover of Tagore's poetry till the end of his life, in his poetic practices he rejected Tagore. This rejection stems partly from a curious sense of rugged pride. There are, of course, other reasons deriving from the highly individual way he saw life and the need to express this vision in a new poetic mode. But the psychological factor cannot be ruled out altogether. He never visited Santiniketan while the great poet was alive. And it may surprise many to know that he never sent any of his books to Tagore. This was an act of impiety, judging by the current practice.

Literary historians generally club Jatindranath with Nazrul and Mohitlal Majumdar as the three significant Bengali poets who broke with the Tagore tradition. Tagore's influence was so overpowering that any hint of a new turn in poetry drew an admiring attention. This approach to a poet is, however, flawed by a tendency to define a new kind of poetry by negatives. While overstating Jatindranath's break with Tagore, critics have tended to lose sight of the many positive features of his poetic mode that promised new directions in Bengali poetry. His racy diction, use of the spoken idiom, the logical, ratiocinative scaffolding in his poetry—all this marked a refreshing change in Bengali poetry. His manner has not been explored by the younger poets.

There is one barrier to the right understanding of his poetry. The popular label of pessimism, thoughtlessly given to his poetry, especially his early poetry, misses the complexity of his vision of life. Indeed he was no melancholy Jaques.

Left poets and critics in the thirties hailed him as an atheist who had torn apart the metaphysical cobwebs around God and religion. Some of them privately said that with some careful brainwashing the poet could be induced to join their ranks as a whole-hearted Marxist. They found his later poetry a very bitter pill.

In academic circles Jatindranath is still remembered as a poet with some significance; but in the wider circle of poets and critics he is a faded memory. Till recently no dependable life of Jatindranath was available to his readers. At the instance of the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad I wrote a brief biography of the poet which came out in October 1985.

In the present monograph I have endeavoured to use the materials of his life as a guide to his poetry. My response to his poetry is, of course, different in certain ways from how other critics have viewed his poetry. As the son of the poet I have one advantage; I can modestly claim that the 'information' I have used here is authentic. Unlike the American 'new critics' I do not underrate the value of 'information' in literary criticism.

All the translations of Jatindranath's poems, whole or in excerpts, have been done by me. This has been a hard wrestle. His homespun diction, his metaphors, far-fetched by the canons of romantic poetry, I have found difficult to translate. In spite of all these limitations my translations, I incline to hope, will transmit to the readers the highly individual tone and character of his poetry.

Essentially a poet, Jatindranath enjoyed writing prose, both serious and light-hearted, generally laced with good-humoured satire. At the request of his friend Kalidas Roy, who founded a small group of poets and critics, Jatindranath wrote a full-length book on practical literary criticism entitled *Kāvya-Parimiti*. Jatindranath seemed to revel in polemical writing, in which his satire tended to be abrasive. A complete view of Jatindranath as a literary figure should include a close examination of his prose.

I am thankful to Dr. S. Mukhopadhyay, Regional Secretary,

Sahitya Akademi, for giving me the opportunity to write this monograph. The idea of reaching Jatindranath's poetry to a wider circle of readers who have little or no Bengali has been uppermost in my mind for quite some time past.

Sunil Kanti Sen

April 1986

Contents

CHAPTER ONE

1887–1911

Jatindranath had always been reticent about his personal life. In a letter written to Sajani Das, the distinguished editor of *Shanibārer Chithi*, he said, 'In the life of a Bengali poet there is hardly any exciting distinction to talk or write about.' To any insistent question about his private life he would answer evasively, 'A poet lives in his poetry.' From an unpublished autobiographical note, sketchy with many loose ends, we get a few glimpses of his early life. He was born on 26 June 1887 in Patilpara, a village in the district of Burdwan, the home of his grandparents on the mother's side. His ancestral home was in Haripur, a small village about three miles from Santipur, a town in the district of Nadia with a long tradition of Vaishnava scholarship. Santipur is still known for the fine craftsmanship of its weavers. About his parentage the poet says in his autobiographical note, 'There is precious little to boast.' The tone is slightly irreverent but in character. The poet's father, Dwarkanath Sen Gupta, took his B.A. examination in 1886 but failed to get a pass. His mother, Mohitkumari, came from an undistinguished middle-class family. Dwarkanath started his life as a junior cashier in the Public Works Department, Balasore and, with a few breaks, worked in that capacity till 1901. In 1905 he was offered the post of Headmaster of Maharshi Institute at Patisar run by the Tagore Estate. He worked there till retirement with a provision of pension, thanks to the generosity of Rabindranath. The poet's grandfather, Gourmohan Sen Gupta, was a large-hearted, amiable eccentric. He was a practising *kaviraj* living for the greater part of his life in a small, dingy apartment at Burrabazar, one of the commercial hubs in Calcutta, inhabited mostly by Marwaris. Gourmohan chose Burrabazar since the Marwaris preferred the indigenous Ayurvedic system of medicine. There are many amusing anecdotes about Gourmohan's eccentricities.

The poet wrote a delightful vignette of his grandfather published in *Kathāsāhitya*, in 1950.

Jatindranath was the only surviving child of his parents. His mother gave birth to another five or six children, either stillborn or victims of death in early childhood. According to a family legend his mother's supplication to a village deity helped him to survive and he was christened Panchu after the name of the deity. Mercifully this name was discarded and he was given the more acceptable name of Jatindranath.

Although the only surviving child, he was not pampered by his parents. His mother, in particular, was an unusual Bengalee mother; her quiet, unobtrusive affection might have been mistaken for indifference. The child grew up in a poor family, and life was almost solitary for him since the family was not crowded with several units jostling together. The poet's aunt, a strong-willed widow with a rich fund of homespun wisdom and native intelligence, held the reins of the family. She had been a shaping influence in the poet's childhood. His austere habits can be attributed to his early life when he learnt to rough it in the midst of poverty.

His early education began in the village school at Haripur; from there he took the post-primary scholarship examination at the age of twelve. It was the first public examination held those days prior to the Entrance examination. From his village school he moved to Calcutta where he stayed at Burrabazar for about a couple of years with his uncle who was a practising *kaviraj*. Plagued by several diseases in his boyhood, he never enjoyed a long spell of good health. I use the term 'plagued' since bubonic plague was the first dread disease that afflicted him in 1900 when he was studying in a Calcutta school. Perhaps the divine intervention of the village deity helped him again. Typhoid visited him close on the heels of plague. Malaria contracted in early childhood never deserted him. From Calcutta he came back to Haripur and joined a high school in a neighbouring village. Plague and typhoid had ravaged his body and his father took him to Balasore. After a brief stay there he was sent back to Calcutta in 1901 and admitted to the Oriental Seminary, a school in north Calcutta. In 1903 he took the Entrance examination and passed it in the first division. Living in dingy apartments with periodic bouts of malaria, he

had had an exceedingly hard school life in Calcutta, but I have learnt from his close friend Sri Bholanath Mukherji, who shared an apartment with him, that Jatindranath bore his afflictions stoically and nothing could snuff out his native wit.

Apart from his formal education at school his early reading had been a modest fare. As a boy he read avidly the Bengali version of the great Indian classic Mahābhārata written by Kasiram Das in the early seventeenth century. The boy read it twice or thrice over. There are in his poetry numerous references, both overt and oblique, to the characters and situations of this epic. He wrote three poems giving a new interpretation to three major Mahābhārata characters, Krishnā, Yudhishthira and Vishma. 'Krishnā', in particular, is a moving and powerful poem. Here is an excerpt.

When in the midst of men
You stood disrobed,
The religious asses weighed the pros and cons;

Was there any man around
From whom to hide your shame?
There you saw the truth:
The utter disgrace of women
In this world of men.
It's the same tale,
Whether in a royal court
Or on a night of riotous revelry.

In a flash of vision
You saw the stark truth,
Shakuni and Yudhishthira,
Karna and Pārtha,
Drona and a doorkeeper,
They are of the same stuff.

Your eyes darted a flash of lightning
And scrawled a terrible curse across the sky,
'I vow death to all men.'

Michael Madhusudan (1824–73), Hemchandra (1838–1903) and Nabin Sen (1847–1909) are generally recognized as the three most important poets of the age of transition preceding the modern age in Bengali poetry. These poets preferred to

write in the grand epic manner. Jatindranath seemed to enjoy their poetry in his early youth before he discovered Tagore, which was a fortuitous event in his life. What, however, kindled his imagination in his boyhood was a highly popular form of folk entertainment known as *kabir larāi*. It was a duel of wits between two village bards with an amazing skill in improvising songs; the clever thrust and parry in these duels would keep the listeners spellbound. Generally a night-long affair, it tended to degenerate into shameless bawdy in the late hours when the gentlefolk would retire. The two bards would often speak for two rival gods. I incline to think that the quickfire wit of these rustic poets had an influence on Jatindranath.

The poet discovered Tagore at the age of nineteen when he was a student at the Bengal Engineering College at Shibpur. His first response to Tagore might be described in the words of Keats:

> Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
> When a new planet swims into his ken.

And the spell lasted till the end of his life. He joined the General Assembly, at present known as the Scottish Church College, and passed the First Arts examination in 1905. It is not precisely known who counselled him to opt for an engineering course. His weak constitution was not fitted for this arduous course, but with a brave face he applied for admission. Predictably he failed in the medical test; his weight was well below the prescribed limit and his chest was woefully narrow. But the doctor was a man of compassion; in his medical report he gave fictitious figures and passed the boy. In March 1907, while still a student at Shibpur, he married Jyotirlata, the second daughter of Charu Chandra Gupta, a legal practitioner at Hazaribagh. In 1911 he passed the final B.E. examination.

In his unpublished juvenilia, a small body of poems and some gushy prose, there is no hint of the future poet. In the handwritten manuscript the poems are undated, but from other evidences it is my conjecture that these were written in the period 1907–9. The poems are effusive outpourings in the worst romantic manner, couched in a stilted language using outworn rhetorical tricks. The poems appearing in his first book of poems *Marichikā* are so distinctive in character that it is

surprising how an imitative poet changed in such a short span of time into a poet with an individual voice. It was not only a new manner but an altogether new vision of life. The possible date of the earliest poem appearing in *Marichikā* is 1901. To borrow a phrase from Michael Madhusudan, it was like a 'mountain peak suddenly bursting into view'.

CHAPTER TWO

1912–1929

Jatindranath is perhaps the first Bengalee poet who worked as an engineer. There is indeed no essential dichotomy between his engineering background and poetic avocation. The rational bent of his mind had something to do with the ratiocinative frame of his poems. He was a careful, painstaking craftsman; in a letter to a young poet he confessed that he took about seven days to put the final shape to a poem. Precise in his choice of words, he generally avoided words and phrases with traditional poetic associations. He liked to use racy, homespun words used by peasants and artisans which only an engineer with an extensive background of overseeing outdoor work is expected to know. In his poetic mode he preferred the unadorned, downright manner. All this can be partly attributed to his professional background. As an engineer he had to tour extensively and he saw many facets of life, especially the rural segment of Indian life, usually unnoticed by a cloistered poet. The strong anti-romantic element in his poetry had its roots in the varied experience he gained in his professional life. In a provocative article on Wordsworth, Aldous Huxley said that a few nights spent in a tropical jungle would have cured Wordsworth of his comfortable nature cult. It can be said with some justice that a couple of hours spent in an Indian village with eyes and ears open would cure many poets of their foggy romanticism. Indeed Jatindranath's engineering background served as a kind of underpinning to his poetry.

After a brief stint as a surveyor in the East Indian Railway, Jatindranath joined the Nadia District Board at Krishnagar as an overseer in April 1913. In 1917 he was promoted to the post of District Engineer and he worked in that capacity till 1920. In many ways his stay at Krishnagar for a period of seven years was highly productive. Although his first book of poems, *Marichikā*, came out in 1923, most of the poems included here

were written at Krishnagar. The book was published by Hemanta Sarkar of Krishnagar, a distinguished gentleman with varied interests who discovered in Jatindranath a new talent and launched him on the literary scene of Bengal. Another significant event in his life was his meeting with Jatindra Mohan Bagchi, already an established poet who enjoyed the affection of Tagore. A scion of an old zamindar family, Bagchi was temperamentally different; but he took to the younger poet at their first meeting and this friendship lasted till the end of Bagchi's life. An early poem of Jatindranath, 'Shiber Gājan', came out in a noted journal, *Mānasi*, edited by Bagchi, whose response to this poem was so ecstatic that he took the first opportunity to meet Jatindranath at Krishnagar. Jatindranath, a newcomer in the literary world, needed this psychological boost.

In his middle age Jatindranath was reserved in his manner, without the expansive bonhomie of his friend Bagchi, but the young engineer at Krishnagar was altogether a different person, club-going, easy and pleasant-mannered, fond of music and playacting. Indeed he earned quite a reputation as an accomplished actor; he took the leading role in three full-length plays of D. L. Roy, the most popular playwright those days. The change in the poet's character can be attributed to an early bereavement in his life. In 1920 his four-year-old son died of cholera. The attack came when the poet was out on tour. When he came home the poor child was dying and the last-minute medical help could not revive him. The shock was unspeakably terrible; Jatindranath gave up his Krishnagar job and retired to his ancestral home at Haripur, with his health shattered. His life took a new turn. He bought a spinning wheel and a hand-operated machine for making matchsticks. Against the advice of his close relations and friends he carried on this Gandhian experiment for three years. In 1923 he saw its futility and reluctantly accepted a new job. He joined the Cossimbazar Estate at Berhampore as its estate engineer. The three-year interlude at Haripur was almost a farewell to poetry, but at Berhampore he regained his health and returned to poetry. In 1923 *Marichikā* came out, followed by *Marushikhā* in 1927.

I said earlier that the discovery of Tagore had been an

intoxicating experience to Jatindranath. But his poetry, especially his early poetry, broke fresh ground in Bengali literature. When *Marichikā* came out, its impact on the discerning readers was immediate as marking a refreshing change in Bengali poetry. Paradoxically, the poet chose four lines from a little-known Tagore poem as the epigraph to *Marichikā*.

> How pleasing to the eye
> To watch a shimmering mirage,
> It's a diverting illusion;
> Now that shimmer has been blotted out,
> We are captive birds in a cage.

Which means Jatindranath starts a new kind of poetry with a tribute to Tagore.

Most of the poems appearing in *Marichikā* are still worth going to, but two poems, in particular, stand out, 'Man-Kavi' and 'Ghumer Ghore'.

Man-Kavi

> O my mind, an unpoetic poet,
> Lie immersed in the depth of this puddle.
> Indeed there's nothing new for you to say.
> Don't shout about it, or they will spurn you.
>
> What you write is all rot;
> Still they want it;
> So doodle away your freewheeling rhymes.
>
> *Kābya* is an anagram of *bākya*;
> If you can't play this simple game,
> Go and kill yourself with opium.
>
> I chanced to meet one day the goddess of poesy
> In a far-off lotus island;
> The moment I touched her feet she started.
> My coarse touch hurt her tender feet.
> Those alone serve the goddess
> Whose fingers are softer than lotus.
>
> Since there's no help
> For your hurt pride,
> For a while rub lard in your callous fingers.

Spread your bed;
Learn to do what the Joneses are doing all around.
Hang your ragged bed-curtain of love outworn,
The holes of privation patched
With webs of empty words.
Lie in your curtained bed
And croon softly,
'My curtain has neither any beginning nor end.'

While the world burns at the core of its heart
Poets warble their pleasant lies.
Go and join in the chorus.
Walk down the beaten path;
Keep on deceiving yourself outright.
Remember the great masters and plagiarize;
What else are they for?

Mind you, whatever you do,
Your dreary life's night will end for certain.
Perchance in the hush of the evening
A sudden lump in the throat
May trouble you.
Who knows it may be an epic in embryo?
For goodness' sake don't cease to serve poesy.

In the beginning it is hard going.
But with an ear for lilting metre
And some money on you
Is it a bad bargain to be a poet?

Your verse may leave the future cold.
Why bother, my unpoetic poet?
You won't live till then.

It is a two-edged poem. First, it is a rejection of the debased romanticism of Tagore's imitators and their manner. Secondly, the poem is a manifesto of a new mode of 'unpoetic poetry' that he is going to launch. Lines like

Kābya is an anagram of *bākya*

or

While the world burns at the core of its heart
Poets warble their pleasant lies

are a direct attack on the facile poeticality and romantic make-believe of Tagore's imitators. And in its racy, downright diction and its use of metaphor, it promises a new turn. 'Hang your ragged bed-curtain of love outworn' recalls the conceit of the English metaphysicals.

What has been termed by literary historians as the 'Kallol era' derives from the journal *Kallol*, edited by Dinesh Das, the mouthpiece of a new group of poets and novelists. Buddhadeb Bose, Ajit Datta, Achintya Sen Gupta, Premen Mitra, Jibanananda Das, Bishnu Dey, were the leading poets of this group. Influenced by the new post-war trends in English literature, these poets started their career in the late twenties and the early thirties. In spite of their different accents, what they shared in common was a new perception of life and a search for a new idiom. The Kallol group hailed the poetry of Jatindranath as a liberating influence in Bengali poetry.

'Ghumer Ghore' is the most ambitious poem written by Jatindranath in his early period, and perhaps the most provocative. It is a long poem with seven sections or movements held together by an all-pervasive ironic tone, half playful and half serious. It is like an open letter to God addressed as a friend. Here the poet takes a hard look at all our received opinions about God, backed up by all kinds of metaphysical and theological casuistry, the teleological interpretation of suffering, the concept of a benign God whose ways, however, are inscrutable, etc.; and he finds them unacceptable to a sensitive, rational mind. The poem is interspersed with ironic digs at the stereotypes of romantic poetry. Occasionally the poet's craving for an uninhibited freedom finds expression in Faustian tones.

In a brief article written after the poet's death, Annadasankar Roy said that he had earlier misinterpreted Jatindranath's poetry and taken him to be a complete atheist. In the thirties this notion was shared by a number of critics. In 'Ghumer Ghore' the poet no doubt is sceptical about all our received dogmas, but the use of playful irony is a mask to hide a deep yearning for an emotional shelter. It is like a lover's quarrel in which banter is an oblique expression of love. The poem, as I view it, is a complex wrestle between the poet's rational mind and a deep emotional urge to make his private

peace with God. Throughout the poem he toys with different images of God. Here are some excerpts.

Who would be your companion in death?
Love and *dharma* start nodding
At 12 o'clock at night.

. . .

From the hills of Cherapunji
Could you lend a cloud to the heart of Gobi or Sahara?

. . .

Imagination, you are fatigued and panting hard,
Drudging without end for countless poets
On the same old mission.

. . .

Who would sing a new Gitā?
Tear apart the pretence of easeful asceticism,
The luxury of ochre robes?
Where is the message winged with fire
That will light up the truth and reveal
The naked image of suffering?
Away with this playful juggle with words,
Let the new voice speak in words sharp as arrow
That will pierce the heart and bring home
The agony of the soul.

. . .

Put me instead in a narrow cage, my friend.
This cage so big mocks me with its seeming freedom.

Stretching away without end, with no doors,
Neither open nor closed.
Trees all around with perches in thousands,
And perches with bowls of feed.
This mockery is hard to endure.

In this prison-house let me live a true prisoner.

I am not sure if the phrase 'spirit of joy' conveys adequately all the nuances of the Sanskrit word 'ānandam', a recurrent term in the Upanishads that greatly influenced Tagore's thinking. Tagore's optimism derived partly from the ancient Hindu doctrine that the spirit of joy, which is the prime source of life, permeates all levels of life. Tagore saw suffering in many forms, but his faith in the ultimate reality of the spirit of joy remained steadfast in spite of a few jolts. In Jatindranath's perception of life, suffering is the central reality; but I should add a rider here. Suffering in his early poetry is not any spiritual anguish, but something starkly this-worldly, felt in the flesh. There is no carefully worked out metaphysical framework in his poetry; he saw suffering and deprivation all around and rejected all teleological interpretations as make-believe; and in his poetry he expresses his response to life in a downright manner. The poems in *Marushikhā*, his second book of poems that came out in 1927, do not mark any significant change in his poetic mode, but in certain poems the tone is a little more strident.

In his metaphors, a very distinctive feature of his poetry, a sharply defined visual quality combines with a daring use of an unexpected analogy. Take, for instance, the following lines appearing in 'Dukhabādi'.

> In the western sky the crimson cloud
> Cloaks thunder and smiles,
> Like a painted harlot leaning
> Against the balcony of purple evening.

Several poems in *Marushikhā* illustrate how the poet found in familiar objects and situations new metaphors of life. In a poem entitled 'Lohār Byathā' the tireless blacksmith and his workshop, where iron is pounded and forged into different shapes, figure as a symbol of the human situation. The poem is an elaborately worked out metaphor in which every detail functions integrally in the whole design; and the emotional pressure behind the poem is so intense that the metaphor does not appear contrived or far-fetched. There is a great deal of cerebration but the total effect is emotionally compelling.

> Dear blacksmith,
> Burning me and pounding me with hammer
> Is that your sole occupation?

You gripped the hammer at the break of dawn,
It's now the dead of night;
The still village quivers
With the trilling notes of cricket.
O, let your hammer rest.
The anvil cries to the sound of bang, bang,
The fire in the smithy dozes,
The pincers hold the chisel in a limp kiss,
Look! the bellows gasp and the hammer prays for rest.
Weary the whole world,
Pray, relax your iron grip.

I hardly know at night
What I had been in the morn.
How you pounded and forged me in different shapes,
Straight or crooked, rounds and squares;
Now you burn me warm, now hot,
Or red like the flaming sun;
Or douse me in cold water
To quench my burning pain.
So freakish your ways,
You melt two strangers in fire and fuse them,
Or lop the head off as a wasteful growth.
In the quick cycle of changes
I hardly know my self.
And down comes the hammer
When I pause to put my thoughts together.
Plunged in fire and in pincer-grip,
I am doomed to helplessness;
But my pride returns each hammer blow,
I defy the wrongs of the mighty.
The tender core of my heart is pure, unalloyed.
What indignities I suffer
When you harden me into steel!
What joy is there in striking Jack
And avenging John?
Anvil and hammer slave day and night,
Your blind tools don't see your cunning
And strike their brothers down.

O dear smith,
The still night my witness, I leave you to judge.
Whisper in my ears the truth.

Could you earn your daily wage without me?
Do I lose a wee bit without you?
How strange you send your gratitude
By raining hammer blows.
You say (if I got you right),
'Suffer my love and you'll unite with me.'
Ah, when did iron hammered in a smithy
Earn the seat of the smith?

Jatindranath was not a cloistered poet. In the late twenties India's political scene was convulsed by new stirrings. The poet had decided views on the new ideas shaping our political life, especially on Gandhism, and he saw with an amazing clear-sightedness the predicament of middle class intellectuals. The poem 'Deshoddhār' is a telling satire on India's new radicals who championed the cause of our deprived peasants and workers, but left them in the lurch when the situation looked grave. I quote the closing stanza of this poem.

On that foul and tempestuous day,
With rain, storm and thunderblast
Deepening the gloom,
You'll forgive me if I give you the slip and rat;
You see, don't you, none but a true peasant
Can brave slush and mud.
Please remember, dear brother,
We are not peasants but the peasant's barristers.

In another poem 'Kshaniker Jāgaran' he satirizes the right intellectuals who preferred to stand and stare when ardent young men responded to the call of Gandhi and braved the hardship of imprisonment.

Let the dull-witted boys go to jail,
To cheer them we stand outside;
We scan the morning paper to see
If the country is getting close to swaraj.
Our leader is a miracle man,
With his magic charm
He will, sure enough,
Cramp all *sahibs* with stiff neck.

Though passionately interested in India's struggle for freedom, he never wrote any patriotic or hortative poem. Perhaps

he felt that solemnity and sentimentality are the two sides of the same coin and he fought shy of both. His favourite tool was satire, which he used to great advantage. His poetic kitbag had a wide range of equipment—banter, irony, sarcasm—which he used to express obliquely his beliefs and emotional concerns. The occasional snatches of tender and emotionally charged lines relieve the satiric tone of his poems. The poet's use of satire is a kind of mechanism to keep away sentimentality and solemnity.

Essentially a poet, Jatindranath would occasionally turn to prose, which was noted for its terseness and vigour. *Sabujpatra* was a distinguished journal edited by Pramatha Chaudhuri, a versatile scholar and a man of discriminating taste. Jatindranath sent a highly provocative article entitled 'Pāthaker Kathā' to Chaudhuri, which was accepted and published in 1925. It was the poet's reaction to an earlier article written by Tagore on 'Charka' (spinning wheel), a polite but strongly worded attack on Gandhi's views on charka. The satirical tone of Jatindranath's article irked Chaudhuri, who appended in the same issue of *Sabujpatra* his own rejoinder.

In the late twenties a vigorous controversy between two schools of thinking, the old and the new, raged in the literary world of Bengal. It was a clash between the old standards of taste and propriety and the demand of the new generation of writers for a total freedom from outworn inhibitions. Sajani Das, who edited *Shanibārer Chithi*, stoutly defended the old school, while three journals published from Dacca, *Kallol*, *Kāli-Kalom* and *Pragati*, championed the new coterie of writers. Occasionally, the controversy degenerated into scurrility. Jatindranath joined in the fray. Though in his poetic mode he was closer to the Kallol group of poets, he viewed with concern the new trends which undermined our established manners and morals. In an article 'Taruner Lajjā', which came out in *Shanibārer Chithi* in 1927, he powerfully argued that the plea for newness and freedom was in truth a retreat from life into an easeful, bohemian world. The article attracted a good deal of notice and provoked sharp reactions from the new school. It is a little surprising that those who spoke for the new school wrote under pseudonyms. Jatindranath was a tough, polemical writer and wrote two more pugnacious rejoinders. There is one curious

element in the poet's stance in this controversy. In certain significant ways he created a new standard of taste by which to judge poetry, but on the question of manners and morals he was very much a conservative.

The poet's stay at Berhampore lasted for six years. The new manager of the Cossimbazar Estate, a retired member of the Indian Civil Service, was a headstrong and eccentric Englishman. Under his peremptory orders the estate office was shifted from Berhampore to Calcutta in 1929.

CHAPTER THREE

1929–1942

Jatindranath was an established poet when he came to Calcutta. His new circle of acquaintances was not particularly wide; they were mostly poets and young literary aspirants. He had a temperamental aversion to formal literary gatherings and disliked backslapping familiarity. But he was extremely affable in intimate circles. He was an accomplished conversationalist, witty and vigorous, and he seemed to enjoy animated disputations on diverse subjects ranging from contemporary literature to politics. In Calcutta his closest friends were Jatin Bagchi and Kalidas Roy. Bagchi had earlier met him at Krishnagar; Roy founded a literary group known as 'Rasachakra', whose members would meet every Sunday at his residence. The discussions centred round varied aspects of literature and principles of literary criticism. As a critic Jatindranath was not interested in abstract theories of aesthetics; his critical faculties were analytical in nature, suited to practical criticism. Kalidas Roy, who had a great admiration for his critical insight, persuaded him to put his thoughts together and write a handbook of practical criticism. Jatindranath initiated a series of discussions in which different minds interacted. This is the origin of *Kāvya-Parimiti*, published in 1931. Jatindranath was familiar with the basic concepts of Sanskrit rhetoricians, but the special merit of his book lay in the application of these concepts to specific works of art. There is hardly any abstract discussion of art and literature; with the help of illustrations mostly drawn from modern Bengali poetry he attempts to test the validity of the basic assumptions of Sanskrit aesthetics. It was perhaps a pioneering work in the field of practical criticism.

Marumāyā, his third book of poems, was published from Calcutta in 1930. In a brief and delightful preface to the first edition of *Anupurbā*, a selection of his poems published in 1946, he said in a light-hearted vein, 'In naming my first three books

I tried to introduce an element of novelty in the ever-green field of Bengali poetry; but the trick didn't work.' *Marichikā* means mirage; *Marushikhā* is desert flame; *Marumāyā* means desert illusion. From a close look at the whole corpus of his poetry one may justifiably conclude that the first three books can be grouped together as constituting the first period of his poetic career. The poems belonging to this period express the same vision of life; in their poetic craft too there is little change. There is perhaps an element of compulsiveness in this vision and the poet instinctively realized it. The book that came out eleven years after the publication of *Marumāyā* was given a new kind of name, *Sāyam*. It marked a significant change in the tone and character of his poetry, a shift from the desert land of his early period.

To get back to the early period, which I am tempted to term the 'desert period' in the manner of Jatindranath. The notion persists in certain circles of the poet's readers that in his early period he was obsessed with a pessimistic view of life. To use a metaphor drawn from Hindu mythology, the poet saw the angry face of Shiva and chose not to see Shiva's benign face. While I am inclined to share this view, I have strong reservations about the term pessimism, applied thoughtlessly to his early poetry. Pessimism, as I understand it, has a streak of morbidity with its roots in most cases in an unhappy private life. Sajani Das, the editor of *Shanibārer Chithi*, said in an obituary note that Jatindranath was perhaps unhappy in his private life. Which means that Das had misinterpreted the character of the poet's view of life. For one thing, Jatindranath was by any standard a happy man in his private life; his life-long relationship with his wife Jyoti was something that any husband can envy. More importantly, there runs throughout his early poetry a strong element of playfulness; lines apparently bitter and cynical are counterpointed by good-humoured banter. This is no mark of pessimism. The truth is he saw suffering so keenly, so intensely in his early life that he looked the other way almost petulantly when the benign face of Shiva flashed across his vision.

As an engineer overseeing outdoor work in the countryside, Jatindranath had a close view of human suffering. 'Phemin riliph' (Famine Relief), included in *Marumāyā*, is truly a remark-

able poem. It is about hungry and emaciated men, women and children driven to do relief work in hot summer in the countryside in the grip of drought and famine. It is still a familiar sight; with a spade and a wicker basket a starving peasant digs earth the whole day to earn a bowl of rice. The official who oversees the work is hawk-eyed since a hungry man has few scruples left. Relief work is unspeakably cruel and harsh but the alternative is starvation and death. It is easy to write a tearful poem on this subject, but Jatindranath wrote a tremendously moving poem without dousing it in sentimentality. The movement is fast and panting; if you don't work briskly you miss your full quota of rice. The language is down-to-earth and slangy. It is indeed amazing how the poet keeps away sentimentality. I wish I could translate the whole poem into English. As an illustration of the acid satire that runs throughout the poem I quote the following:

> Do tell me
> Uncle Rahim,
> The god so kindly
> You pray to
> So importunately,
> What is he?
> A Hindu or a Moslem?
> Should we burn or bury him?

Jatindranath was highly responsive to the current social and political situation and his occasional excursions into prose were in several instances prompted by what was happening around. In September 1931, unarmed political prisoners in Hijli Detention Camp in the district of Midnapore were fired upon by the sentries. The provocation was trivial; two prisoners were killed and several injured. It was perhaps the first instance in India under British Raj of political prisoners being shot down. Jatindranath was the first literary figure of Bengal to react to this shocking event. He wrote a highly pungent satire which was published in *Shanibārer Chithi* in October 1931, hardly two weeks after the killing took place; it was titled 'Hinjli Darshan'. In a week all copies of the journal were sold out and the editor had to bring out a reprint. Tagore's justly famous poem 'Prashna', published three months later, was the

poet's agonized response to this massacre. In 'Hinjli Darshan' the veil of mock-seriousness was so thin that even the most careless reader could see the intention of the writer. It was not only a brilliant piece of satire but an act of daring.

To return to his poetry. The poem 'Ketaki' appearing in *Marumāyā* is characteristic of his manner. Ketaki or keya is an unusual flower enclosed in long sheath-like green leaves with sharp, prickly edges; its long white petals and yellow pollens have a heady fragrance. There is a popular belief that deadly snakes love to coil round the bushy undergrowth of a keya plant. In Bengal it generally blooms in the rainy season. Old Calcutta was known for its street criers; 'Keya phool' was one of its familiar street cries. I give here the bare skeleton of the poem 'Ketaki'. It's a rainy evening. At a busy street crossing in central Calcutta where 'the butcher chops chunks of meat beside a flower shop', the poet notices a street crier selling ketaki. He hurriedly buys one, brings it home and hangs it on a peg in the wall. The intoxicating fragrance of the keya makes him drowsy when he is startled by a strange vision: the keya is dead, hanging from the wall; and its disembodied fragrance hovers round the wall. What the poet makes of this experience is characteristic of his manner. Keya is brought from the woods to be sold in the streets of Calcutta. It is a symbol of a sensitive, suffering soul enslaved in a commercial world. The details are so deftly worked out in the poem that the object completely fuses with its symbolic connotations.

> The night is asleep; I wait intently
> For the first plaintive note
> Of the bird in early dawn;
> Alas, where is fled my sleep, O where?
> Is there a faint glimpse of the moon
> Going down behind the cloud?
> In vain I close my eyelids
> To shut in my sleep;
> There in the sky, dark and blind,
> My sleep pursues the fleeing fragrance of keya.

The publication of *Sāyam* in 1941 marks the close of the first period of his poetry and the beginning of the second. *Sāyam*, *Trijāmā* (1948), and *Nishāntikā*, published posthumously in

1957, may be grouped together; for in the poetry of this period there is a noticeable shift in the poet's attitude and along with it a subtle change in diction. Critics with a Marxist background who admire his early poetry interpret this shift as a retreat from agnosticism to faith. I find this view unacceptable. While analysing the poem 'Ghumer Ghore' in Chapter 2, I said that the poet's relationship with God could be likened to a lover's quarrel. In his early poetry the wrestle between a wakeful intellect and a deep emotional need is sharply focused. His voice is strident because he could neither accept the teleological view of suffering nor reconcile suffering with the traditional concept of a benign God. In his later poetry the tone is generally mellow. It would appear that he has made his private peace with God. Earlier he saw in familiar objects and situations metaphors of suffering; in the poetry of his later period there are clear indications that he is beginning to see the gentle face of life and nature. And there is a new lyricism, a new iridescence in his diction. I give brief excerpts from two poems appearing in *Sāyam*.

In the field not far away
A *santhal* girl sings and trips along;
Like the rattledrum of the dancing Shiva,
Swaying her body, firm and tight-shaped,
On a waist so slender, just a handful.

. . .

Where is beauty?
The maiden in her private room
Stands before a mirror:
She teases her long, tangled hair,
Deftly twirls her fingers,
And twines her hair into braids,
Her sari worn casually,
She pulls its skirt over and over again,
To throw a veil of modesty
On the two tender playmates
Nestling in her budding breasts,
With a smile she darts a gentle frown
To chide into shame
The twin buds, curious and staring.

In the last poem of *Sāyam* there is a new tenderness in his tone. He views the suffering he had earlier seen and experienced without any bitterness. The poem is entitled 'Shesh Dekhā' (Last Meeting).

> This perhaps is our last meeting.
> I would be all alone in the coming darkness.
> My gift of sorrow still unoffered to you
> Goes a-crying in the sky,
> In the one-stringed lute of the wan eventide,
> And the dust-grey, ochre-robed twilight.

The poem 'Kachi Dāb' is justly famous as one of his best and most characteristic poems. The situation that starts the poem is quite commonplace. On a cold winter evening the poet hears an old street hawker's cry at his door, 'green coconut'. The poet gently says, 'You must be crazy to expect any buyer at this hour. Who would care for a coconut drink on a winter evening?' The disappointed old man implores the poet to help him set down the loaded basket. The poet obliges; the old man totters and plumps down on the doorstep. Out of pity the poet buys all the coconuts. With tears rolling down his sunken cheeks the old hawker thanks the poet and walks away. The situation is Wordsworthian in its bald matter-of-factness. There is a turn at the second movement of the poem, not a didactic one in the manner of Wordsworth. The poet takes out his *tānpurā* and hums an improvised song. Half in jest he laments his unkind fate that sends a bent-backed old man to his door, while to other poets, notably two, come soft-eyed young maidens with baskets of flowers. The third movement begins with another dramatic turn. In a state of trance the poet sees the old hawker transformed into the image of Shiva, the god of the poor and the deprived. The earlier tone of playfulness changes into impassioned accents, both in diction and movement. The manner is so characteristic of Jatindranath. Here is an excerpt from the third movement of the poem.

> Naked in winter and summer
> An aimless vagrant,
> Hunger-stricken you stagger along;
> Your body dusted with ashes
> Wafted from the dead pyres in your heart,

Garlands of bone twine round your limbs,
Your veins burn with snake venom;
The restless Ganga streams down your cheeks,
And in your forehead
Set the crescent moon
On the last night of its dark, waning phase.

It is significant that of the countless gods in the Hindu pantheon Shiva alone kindles the poet's imagination. He figures in several poems. The first poem appearing in *Marushikhā* is a hymn to Shiva, and in *Nishāntikā* there is a whole poem addressed to this god. The traditional concept of Shiva took on new accretions in the folk culture of Bengal. The image of Shiva as the destroyer of evil is still there, but the image of an absent-minded, half-naked mendicant, a drug addict ragged by impish village urchins, is the product of Bengal's folk imagination. Here is an extract from the poem 'Bhikhāri':

Who is so cruel
To throw a hissing snake
Round your neck?
Who fastened your loins
With a strip of tiger-skin?
Smeared with ashes
Your gentle limbs?
Who gashed your brow
With the blow of a sickle?

This is the popular image of Shiva in rural Bengal. In Jatindranath's poetry Shiva is closer to this image but transfigured into a symbol of suffering humanity.

For a brief while the poet turned to the enchanting world of Kālidās and translated *Kumārasamhbabam* into Bengali verse. I looked up the poet's files but could not trace the exact date of its publication. Contrary to the normal practice the publisher did not indicate the year of publication on the title page. From other evidences it is my conjecture that it came out in early 1942.

As the poet put it in a brief introductory note, it is not an exact translation but a kind of fresh creation, keeping close to the essential spirit of the original, its poetic richness and highly exquisite rhetorical adornments. According to many scholars,

only the first seven books are unmistakably the work of Kālidās. Jatindranath's Bengali version is based on these seven books. In his introductory note the poet makes another point. In the Sanskrit original the pictorial richness occasionally tends to be extravagant, obscuring the focal point. In the first book, for instance, the grandeur and enchantment of the Himalayas are recaptured with great felicity, but the verses do not cohere into an organized pattern. This is how the poet felt while going to the original. Hence in the Bengali version he skipped many *slokas* and pieced together only those he considered more relevant. With my limited Sanskrit I cannot judge the merit of this approach.

There is another feature of the Bengali version which cannot escape the notice of a reader familiar with the original. In describing Umā in the full bloom of her youth, Kālidās dwells on certain physical details lingeringly, more than may suit with modern taste. Perhaps the age of Kālidās was closer to the age of Shakespeare in this respect. Jatindranath was no Bowdler going to Kālidās. But he prunes away certain details while retaining the essential lyricism of the description. According to Kalidas Roy, who was a distinguished poet and a discerning critic, Jatindranath's *Kumārsambhab* is a new creation which recaptures the essential poetry of the original. To Jatindranath going to the poetry of Kālidās meant a refreshing interlude in his poetic career.

'Eshiār Āshā' (The Hope of Asia) is a new kind of poem in its imaginative sweep and evocative imagery.

I was seated alone:
It was so sudden;
A flight of birds came swarming across the sky.
Darkening the east and the west
With awesome shadows.
Their flapping wings panted
And breathed the day of doom;
Their eyes shone dark
Like piercing röntgen rays,
And rattled the skeletal bones
Of the dead.
The great arch in the west cracked,
And the sun went down.

In that dread dark
The birds flew in swarms.

In the cascading light
Of aurora borealis
They had their morning wash;
Sweeping across the skies of Pamir
They perched for a while
On the peak of Gaurishankar
And left their footprints
On its ageless snowbed.
With the wild lash of nor'wester
Would the birds lift the Black Sea,
And soothe the burning Sahara
With clouds dark and billowy?
Would they put out the lamps
That burn in the sky?
And sink in the Atlantic
All our Pacific illusions?
Would their wings release
The agonies that groan
In the beds of the seven seas?
Would they free all the pent up pain
Caged in the fissures
Of ancient rocks?

(In my translation I have skipped a few lines.)

A tremendous poem, powerfully conceived, it defies a simple prose meaning. Its title 'The Hope of Asia' seems to suggest that the birds starting their flight from the 'cascading light of aurora borealis' bring a message of hope to Asia. In their flight over the skies of Asia there is a brief detour to the desert of Sahara. Does it suggest our common bond of suffering? What do the images of darkness and death imply? With the sweep of their mighty wings they release the pent up agonies of Asia, bringing in its wake an exhilarating breath of freedom. The metaphors are sharply defined, giving a strong visual quality to the poem. And its ambiguity makes for richness.

The poem 'Bāishe Shrāvan, 1348' (22 Shrāvan, 1348), occasioned by the death of Tagore, is not a conventional tribute to the great poet. It has a complex pattern of meaning in which

the poet's own experience of life is interwoven with his individual response to Tagore's poetry and to his death. A subtle use of lines borrowed from Tagore gives a new resonance to this poem. 22 Shrāvan, 1348 is the fateful day Tagore died. Watching from a street corner in Calcutta the flower-bedecked bier of the poet, followed by thousands of jostling mourners, Jatindranath recalls a famous poem of Tagore in which the familiar romantic conceit that death is the crown and consummation of life is transmuted into a powerful poem where death is imagined as Shiva, the great lover, coming to marry Gauri. Death here is a ravishing, tempestuous union, the fulfilment of life intensely lived. The manner in which Jatindranath uses this romantic conceit in the context of Tagore's own death is a fine instance of bringing together different associations to give a new density to poetry. He recalls another poem written by Tagore in an hour of crisis when a bleak despair seemed to blot out his carefully nursed optimism. Jatindranath uses these lines to record his own response to the death of Tagore. The great poet's death filled most of his readers with a sense of desolation, blotting out the last promise of hope. Jatindranath shows an astonishing poetic intelligence in using Tagore's lines to express his own sense of deprivation. I hate to suggest that this is a kind of artifice employed by the poet. The emotional authenticity of the poem is not a contrived effect. The movement of the poem with a subtle variation of long and short lines and its highly evocative diction heighten the emotional intensity of the poem.

'Nāstik' is a notable poem appearing in *Sāyam*. There is gentle irony in the title, which means an atheist. I give an English rendering of the first verse paragraph.

It's the same old land;
The same old road and *sal* forest;
The same old sky tender with clouds
And girdled with hills.
My old beloved still at my side,
And yet my mind is numb and joyless.
I know, dear friend,
You are beyond my reach.
So my heart cries out,
'O, let me grasp you in my arms.'
From the seeming gains of life I have learnt,

What I achieve is vain;
I chase the truth that lies
Well beyond my grasp.
Youth has left my body, mind and soul
Without any trail;
I view the world
Through a pair of glasses.
The green has lost its green
The blue its blueness.
This ancient world looks decrepit and stale.
I sail in a broken boat of this world
Out in wide emptiness,
My last day looms dark.
In the brightness of light
I had looked for you with hope and fear;
Now unafraid and empty of hope,
I shall search for you in the dark.

The first part of this paragraph expresses a familiar religious experience—an intense yearning for a communion with God and a sense of deprivation when the goal eludes the seeker. What is new is the stoical courage expressed in the closing lines. Tennyson in a similar situation was sustained by a cheering faith that he would meet his Pilot face to face. Our poet sails in a broken boat and what looms ahead is wide emptiness, not the ocean of peace that beckoned Tagore. And in that dark void he will search for God without any hope or fear. The poet's faith is more like despair, very different from traditional faith.

In 1939 the poet had an interesting correspondence with Satish Das Gupta, editor of the journal *Rāstrabāni*, which aimed at propagating the views of Gandhi and, especially, his views on khadi-based cottage industry. The poet himself viewed Gandhi's basic tenets as a practical guide at all levels of life. He sharply reacted to what happened at Tripuri when Subhas Bose got a raw deal from the Congress high command. There were good reasons to believe that Gandhi had lent his tacit support to this apparently unethical move. At any rate Jatindranath was not convinced that Gandhi was unaware of the backstair intrigue that ousted Subhas Bose. He wrote several letters to Satish Das Gupta in which he forcefully argued that he had always viewed Gandhi's doctrines not as a matter of political expediency and that his tacit support to

Patel had tarnished his image and undermined the validity of the doctrine of truth.

In 1942 panic gripped Calcutta when the Japanese threatened to bomb the city. The exodus that followed is a shameful episode in our history. It proved once again that most of our brave stances are so brittle. The Cossimbazar Raj Estate office was shifted from Calcutta to Berhampore. After spending thirteen years in Calcutta the poet went back to Berhampore.

CHAPTER FOUR

1942–1953

The first poem he wrote at Berhampore, 'Danchi Bāboo', was a satire on the influx of panicky Calcutta *baboos* in a mofussil town. They found the local market extremely cheap, 'damned cheap' in their smart Calcutta lingo. Hence the nickname 'danchi baboo'. The poem playfully uses this term and satirizes their mad scramble for houses in a small and congested mofussil town. The satire is free from any pungency; in his relaxed mood the poet could be extremely witty and lighthearted.

In 1946 came out *Anupurbā*, an anthology of poems selected by the poet himself from his first four books. The brief preface written by him is a fine specimen of his later prose, laced with wit and humour. There is also a subtle hint here that he had always been a bad public relations man.

Two years later, in 1948, *Trijāmā*, his fifth book of poems, was published. The shift in his poetry, both in tone and diction, noticeable in *Sāyam* is more pronounced here. It is just not true that in his second period he turns away from suffering; but the tone of indignation or petulance that marked his early poetry is no longer there and his voice is less strident. Perhaps more remarkable is the new richness and flexibility in his diction. I shall quote one poem which should have received greater attention from his critics. It is entitled 'Kato-dur' (How Far?).

The land summer-parched;
The midday is a withering thirst
With leaping tongues of flame;
It streams into my heart.
The prickly date-palm
Leans on its shadow
And journeys alone, absent-mindedly,
Down the quiet path of Time,
Towards a mythical tree.

Sheltered in a bramble shrub
A jackal lolls out its tongue,
And in rhythmic gasps
Prays for the morning sun.

In the ploughed field of the sky
The day searches for night and darkness,
Like a turtle pining for the cool bed of sea.
In the zodiac the restless Pisces
Lashes its tail and strains
To get into a mossy pool.
The sun burns fierce.
How far is the night
And the promise of cool water?
The bat in its folded wings
Has sleep bolted in;
The midday—a sleepless, close-locked prison.
In the distant horizon
The world pounds its head
And questions in a voice
Muted in despair,
Where is hope, or faith? O where?
The sun burns fierce;
The date-palm leans on its shadow
And journeys alone,
Down the solitary path of Time.
How far is the end? O how far?

The poetic method is something new in his poetry. There is no ratiocinative frame, nor any direct statement; the poem relies chiefly on imagery to communicate its meaning. The image of the prickly date-palm journeying alone, visually so evocative, has rich undertones of meaning. The poet's imagination ranges from the zodiac to the bramble shrub sheltering a jackal. The vision of suffering without any promise of 'cool water' has seldom found such poignant expression in his early poetry.

Unlike most contemporary poets who romanticized poverty as a blessing in disguise, Jatindranath found little merit in it. Modern life, as he saw it, was barren in all terms. His poem 'Anna-samasyā' is a poet's tongue-in-cheek defence against the common man's grouse that poets indulge in pipe-dreams while he grovels in poverty.

We, the verse makers,
Know how rice sells in the market;
We do aver
That stomach is the root of our heart;
Yet we are a shameless tribe;
We make poetry
To cheer our joyless days,
And try to do the impossible.
Our vision is awry,
Hence we see an immortal world
Shimmer beyond the bourn of death.

In some of his later poems we notice a new liveliness in his mood and diction. Here are a few lines from 'Bāsanti Chā' (Spring Tea).

In a dainty room
With flowers in vases,
Pictures on the wall,
And carpet on the floor;
An unseen beauty, her back turned on me,
Pours tea,
That overflows the cup
And spills in the saucer.
Gracious lady,
With your apple-red fingers
Pour in my earthen cup
The steaming gold-hued drink.

Alas, the vase has disappeared,
The carpet whisked away,
My old lady stands with a cup of tea,
The cup scarred with cracks,
Tea blackish and stale
Made in the kitchen
A long while past.
Dear friend, you should know
I gave up tea long ago.

Freedom came to India on 15 August 1947. The poet's first response to freedom as expressed in the poem 'Mukti' was one of guarded optimism. There are, however, oblique hints in the poem that India did not earn it the hard way and that the common man was mentally ill-equipped for it.

I don't think we have ever met before.
How should I recognize you?
Darkness shrouds the world,
The night restless with pattering rain;
I don't remember
To have ever heard your voice.
Do I dare go out with you
On this murky night?
My eyes are still heavy with sleep,
And limbs tired and listless.
Broken ties weave patterns of dream
At the corners of my bed.

In another poem entitled 'Pyāthi-bibhrāt', which is an elaborately worked out allegory, he makes fun of the various warring political doctrines, each claiming special merit as a certain cure for India's ills. When the ailing girl Bhārati (symbolizing India) recovered, most of the doctors felt unhappy and predicted her death. What cured her was sheer quackery—that is what they said in private. It is a highly enjoyable poem in which the poet satirizes the doctrinal fanaticism of India's political leaders. He, however, does not conceal his own preference for the Gandhian prescription.

Disillusionment did not take long to come:

Who are the ones
Who steal first and go to jail afterwards?
Oh, the dull-witted thieves.

Who are the ones
Who first go to jail
And take to thieving afterwards?
Oh, the sharp-witted swadeshiwallas.

We the guileless servants of the Muse
Are adept in a different art of stealing,
With no prison-life before or after.

Give us food to eat
And clothes to wear round our loins,
Give us arms, O Freedom,
To protect our life.

Freedom said with a smile,
'Do I have any shop counter?
How do I get these things?
The chains round your arms and ankles
I have untied.
Now you are free to live or die,
Do what you will.'

One does not associate love poetry with the kind of poetry that made Jatindranath known to his readers. He wrote more than a dozen love poems addressed to his wife. This has few parallels in our literature. Significantly, all these poems were written in the second period of his poetic career. There is one exception; *Marumāyā*, his third book of poems, was dedicated to his wife. I quote a few lines from the dedicatory poem.

In my desert heart
You bring the enchantment of a cloud,
You are the cool shadow
Beneath a summer-parched tree.
Are you a fleeting vision
Like an enchanting cloud
Or a moving shadow?

The poet was happy in his married life, but happy domesticity of the sort we are familar with cannot be the only inspiration of these poems, remarkable in more than one way. For one thing, they are not simple lyrical effusions; they explore the whole gamut of love, ranging from simple felicity to a sense of satiety, from the tenderness of shared love to male assertiveness. One particular poem put in the mouth of his wife is almost breathtaking in its frankness. She is happy that youth has left her; she found her husband's male appetite too exacting to endure any longer. I found this poem untranslatable. Here is an extract from another poem, entitled 'Ālo-āndhār'.

At last when the night is still,
You put out the lamp
That lights our bed.
Your fragrant hair
Or the soft tinkle of your bangles
Fills the darkness with the sweetness of nectar.

This darkness is your gift to me;
I drink it again and again
To slake my thirst insatiate;
In its cool shower
I wash my body
Scalded with my day's hot toil.
It fills my heart
Like holy water filling a pitcher.
The night outside departs;
The winged light of the morn
Taps at my door.
With folded hands I plead,
'Oh, let me alone.'

'Nirbāsan' is an unusual love poem. I give an extract.

My love lies in dust
Weary and cloyed to sickness.
Oh, let the hope of fresh parting
With tears and aches intense,
Revive its drooping soul.
In the pale sky
The moon shines wan;
A numb satiety
After a riot of pleasures.
Let dark clouds
Sweep over the moon-blanched horizon,
With rumbles and lightning flashes
Bring the fearsome message of storm,
And quicken my love into a smile.

Silent and sleepless
Both of us have spent this long summer night;
Together we pray with folded hands,
Let a fresh call of banishment
Part us two.

Jatindranath's interest in Gandhism never wavered; it was neither a passing fad nor a blind devotion. For diverse reasons Gandhi and what he stood for had never been accepted without reservations in Bengal, except for short spells of heady fervour. Jatindranath was perhaps the only poet of his generation who held fast to his belief in the essential rightness of Gandhi's thinking. He wore khadi throughout his life and plying *charka*

was a part of his daily routine. He was not a religious man in the accepted sense of the term, never a temple-going Hindu; he seldom observed the ordinary rituals of Hindu religion. It is indeed a little surprising that he plied his spinning wheel as a kind of ritual. The poet had an extremely rational mind, and it is only fair to assume that he accepted Gandhism as a valid rational philosophy. After the ouster of Subhas Bose from the Congress there was a sharp decline in Bengal in the already waning popularity of Gandhi. The poet too had certain misgivings about the ethical propriety of the Congress action, taken apparently with the approval of Gandhi, but his faith in the essentials of Gandhism did not falter. His friends privately railed at him; Mohit Majumdar was almost offensive when the poet began to write short verses based on the sayings of Gandhi. After the assassination of Gandhi he wrote a moving poem based on an ancient myth of crime and retribution—Rāma killing Bāli unethically and Krishna dying at the hands of a hunter. The poet uses this myth to advantage and finds in the death of Gandhi a symbolic redemption of man.

Jatindranath had earlier planned to write a series of verses on Gandhi's views and ways of thinking and he stumbled on a book he had been looking for. *The Mind of Mahatma Gandhi*, compiled by R. K. Prabhu and U. R. Rao, is a collection of excerpts from Gandhi's writings and speeches on the essentials of his beliefs. This is the source book of the poet's *Gāndhi-Bāni-Kanikā*, published in 1948. The cover design was made by Indra Dugar. The verses were written in a plain, unvarnished language; the poet's intention was to reach Gandhi's thoughts to the common reader.

About two years later came out *Rathi O Sārathi*, an abridged version of the Gitā in Bengali verse. In a brief introduction the poet says that he is not interested in the various learned glosses on the meaning of the Gitā. The dilemma that Arjuna faced on the eve of the great battle of Kurukshetra still faces the modern man. Do we find in Krishna's answer a satisfying solution? This is the core of the poet's thinking on the Gitā. The poet aims to state in simple terms the basic problem that exercised Arjuna's mind and Krishna's message of non-attached *karma* in which Arjuna seemed to find the final answer. The book, the poet further says, is not meant for people ripe in years and wis-

dom; it is meant primarily for earnest young readers searching for the right path of action. *Rathi O Sārathi* has been favourably noticed as a highly readable book.

In his later poetry Jatindranath made new experiments in verse form. The poem on the death of Tagore was written in the form of a prose-poem; the subtle variations in its rhythm communicate the complex movements of the poet's response to Tagore. His diction, too, in his later poetry gained in plasticity. In the first phase of his poetry his avoidance of the lyrical phrase was a deliberate choice. In the poems belonging to the second period he is more catholic in his choice of expression; the language retains the rugged masculinity of his early poetry, but he is not afraid to use the lyrical phrase and words with traditional poetic associations. This change reflects a new mellowness in his attitude and a widening of his range of interest. He started to notice things hitherto left out. There was no sea-change in his basic perception of life, but he seemed to enjoy life's little joys. In a few poems he jestingly recalls his early preoccupation with the theme of suffering as the central reality of life. The poem 'Gandha-dhārā' was written in a relaxed and playful mood, but there is a hint of earnestness.

I said before,
'The scent of flowers pricks my heart.'
I don't dislike it now,
I seem to love the scent of flowers.
Now every April morning
I gather fragrant *champā* and *chāmeli*,
The sweet-scented *mallikā*,
And adorn my table.
I hear their soft whisper
In my china plates and vases,
Their lips vibrant with joy;
The air laden with fragrance
Thrills my heart.

A cup of milk on my table
Fresh and hot,
And biscuits with butter;
The fly coaxed by the smell
Flits around;
The sky rings with joyous cuckoo notes.

The symphony of sweet scents and sounds
Quickens my heart.
Now I seem to see
The meaning of life.

With the day of parting not afar,
I bring fresh flowers
To adorn my broken vase.
My soul athirst
For a cup of cheering drink.

(In my translation I have left out a few lines.)

The poem is dated Baishākh, 1355 B.S. 'Now I seem to see/The meaning of life.' Did he?

The poem 'Dubelā Dumutho' is dated Chaitra, 1357 B.S. (1950)

Just keeping body and soul together
With two morsels of food;
And beyond
The grey evening sky
Stretching endlessly.

Tell me, dear friend,
Where is the road
My despair, my desolate heart
Shall take?
Where will it find a meaning?

He sweats and slaves
Round the clock,
And hardly earns
Two morsels of stale, wormy food.
I know, yes I know
The voice of the great *Shudra*
Sleepless and hungry.

I get into a muddy pond
(My daily round)
Push aside the floating scum,
Invoke the holy Ganga,
And take my morning dip.

Put a few morsels of food
In my dyspeptic stomach.
I carry in a dirty rag
A stolen jewel
That sparkles bright.
Indeed, I don't see
The meaning of this life.

The lines, 'I carry in a dirty rag/A stolen jewel/That sparkles bright' are a caustic reference to a popular myth about India's spirituality attributed to Vivekananda: 'While the West carries a clod of earth in a bright carpet, the East carries a shining *kohinoor* in a dirty and torn rag.'

The poet's health, never very good, declined in 1950. He rightly felt that he could no longer do justice to the whole-time job of an engineer and tendered his resignation. At the request of the Estate Manager he accepted a part-time job as a consulting engineer; it meant light work for him without any exacting outdoor responsibility. In 1952 he finally retired. He stayed on at Berhampore till June 1953.

At Berhampore the poet met Annadasankar Roy, who was posted there as District Magistrate of Murshidabad. Besides their common interest in literature the poet shared with Roy a deep attachment to Gandhi's ideals. Rezaul Karim, another distinguished citizen of Berhampore, edited a weekly, *Ganarāj*, the official organ of the Murshidabad District Congress. The poet was persuaded by Mr Karim to write short comments on the current social and political situation. These short notes, witty and forthright, came out regularly and attracted considerable notice. I wish I could give a few specimens of these notes. Mr Rezaul Karim's old files are no longer in his possession.

Most of the poems appearing in *Nishāntikā*, published posthumously in 1957, were written during his stay at Berhampore. He had never been a prolific writer; at Berhampore too he wrote sparingly. When in 1951 he turned to Shakespeare for translating his major tragedies it was hinted in certain circles that his creative impulse had dried up. The hint had two serious implications. First, the few poems he wrote during this period lacked distinction. And secondly, translating Shakespeare into Bengali verse is non-creative work. To meet the second point first. The

tragic world of Shakespeare meant to Jatindranath a new world of experience, rich in its complexity and varied in its emotional range and poignancy. It gripped and enchanted the poet's imagination. Exploring this world was an experience as intense as exploring the world of personal experience. And to translate Shakespeare meant giving shape in a different language to the felt experience of exploring a new world. The poet did a tremendous amount of homework for this job. To underrate it as non-creative work is to take a narrow view of what creative work should mean. For about three years Jatindranath was immersed in Shakespeare. His translations of *Macbeth* and *Othello* were published serially in *Basumati* and of *Hamlet* in *Shanibārer Chithi*. Before turning to Shakespeare he had gone to Coleridge and translated his great poem 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', which was published serially in the journal *Bartamān* in 1948.

To return to the first point that the few poems he wrote during this period lacked distinction. I shall quote the final stanza of the poem entitled 'Anta' written in this period.

> The sun went down in fatigue;
> I saw in a few moments
> My future drawn in colour
> Projected in the evening sky.
> Smitten by age
> I lay in a bed of thorns,
> An invalid sweating hard;
> And my love sat beside
> With a winnowing fan.

Any careful reader of Jatindranath's poetry will find in the mocking tone and imagery of these lines his distinctive stamp. Indeed there was no decline in his poetic powers; what happened was something altogether different. One notices in some of his poems a new gentleness, a lowering of his tone, indicating a strong inner urge to make his private peace with God. Perhaps the poet was tiring of his long wrestle with God; it was, as I suggested earlier, a kind of lover's quarrel. The old grouse that his friend had forsaken him is still there, but the tone is muted. Here are a few lines from 'Bhor Hoye Elo'.

Poet, your dawn is about to break;
In the woods
The early birds have left their nest,
They chirp and twitter;
The pigeons cry in their dovecots.
The long night is closing,
The morning sun of Death
Stands near watching
To gently wake you.
Sailing in the boat of darkness
He has come
To brighten your last journey.

Stop praying to your God.
Your God of love;
He alone knows his whereabouts.
Greet Death the inevitable,
With merciful eyes
He promises salvation.

It is indeed a strange poem, expressing in a new language a sense of quietude after his lifelong quest for God—his long quarrel and final reconciliation in which God comes in the guise of Death.

In two or three poems written in this period we find once again the spirit of rebelliousness so pronounced in his early poetry. 'Parābhab' is one such poem. I vividly recall the genesis of this poem. It was early evening in April. The poet had gone out for a short walk on the campus of I.I.T., Kharagpore. A sudden burst of nor'wester took him unawares. In the menacing darkness the poet lost his bearings. Lashed by the raging storm he tottered and looked for shelter. The poet was a stranger at Kharagpore. A colleague of mine who did not know his identity helped him. When he came back home he looked badly shaken.

Wearing a mask of death
Fearsome and menacing,
It's my old friend there,
Barring my way.
The path dark and narrow,
I am feeble and all alone.

You brave knight-errant,
Funny, you meet me here.
A tottering old man,
I carry my big cross
Of long suffering.
Now you come, you gallant youth,
To take a measure of my strength.

What a shame,
I greet such a coward
As a friend.
My old frame
Is a heap of wet ash.
I wish my burning shame
Would quicken it into a leaping flame.
Alas, that is not to happen.

Once again,
Pitted against a masked warrior
In an unequal combat
I go down fighting.
Yet it's my pride and glory
Not to cease to fight.

Only a man worthy to be a man
Is vanquished once and again.

Written in 1952, barely two years before his death, this is the poet's last defiant fling at God.

CHAPTER FIVE

. . 1953–1954

I am no poet, no poet so-called;
I am afflicted with primeval suffering
Churned from seething chaos.
I hardly know when or where
This will find its quietude.
I journey towards the unknown,
The uncharted milky way of death,
Where a stone-deaf Providence
Writes in letters of fire
On the brow of elemental darkness
A deed of man's eternal bondage.

—'Kavi Nahi'

In June 1953 Jatindranath closed his establishment at Berhampore and came to Sindri with his wife and eighty-five-year-old mother, to live with his second son Arun, who worked in the Fertilizer Project. He stayed in his three-roomed official quarters at Rohrabund, a quiet residential area. Two of the poet's daughters, the eldest Shyamali and the youngest Shukla, also lived there.

His health had declined alarmingly and he had a nagging fear that he might predecease his mother. During his all too brief life at Sindri he wrote little, not more than three poems and one delightful satirical piece published in *Shanibārer Chithi*. His last poem was written in February 1954. I shall come back to it later.

At Sindri the poet seemed to have lost his will to live. The usual worries that trouble the head of a middle-class family in old age were not there. His four daughters had been married off, and except for his youngest son his other two sons were settled in life. I worked as a teacher of English at I.I.T., Kharagpore. We noticed a strange detachment in his attitude to life and small family affairs. Throughout his life he had been

a careful and conscientious head of the family, attending to the smallest detail. He hated all kinds of absent-minded romanticism. This sudden change in his attitude was therefore ominous. Sindri had a well-equipped hospital and the doctors there were friendly and competent. But Jatindranath was reluctant to go through any elaborate medical check-up or treatment. He was suffering from a dilated heart. He was spared one cruel irony; his mother died at Sindri, hardly three months before his own end came.

In June 1954 he came to Kharagpore with his wife. After a long, tiring journey he looked thoroughly worn out when he got down from the train. The Kharagpore station boasts the longest platform in India and a subway. He was carried in an invalid chair by four bearers. 'Funny', he said jokingly, 'even before my death I am carried on the shoulders of four bearers.' His sense of humour never deserted him.

At Kharagpore we were mentally prepared for his death, but hardly realized that the end would come so soon. In many ways his wife was an amazing woman. Back in 1920, when the poet's health broke down at Krishnagar, he gave up his job and retired to his village where he spent three years spinning *charka* and chasing a futile Gandhian experiment. At an age when our daughters are still starry-eyed his wife had shown an astonishing patience and courage in nursing him back to health and poetry. At Kharagpore she showed the same quiet courage and patience.

> We are ageing fast, both of us,
> What do we have in our kitty
> To cross the last river?
> Gaya, Benaras are rather far,
> But Belur is so near;
> Did we ever care to go there?
>
> —'Mantrahin'

The end came on 17 September 1954. Only four of us were at his bedside, my mother, my wife, myself and my brother Tarun. A few days earlier my mother had wanted her son Arun and her daughters to come, but the dying poet gave a no. His detachment from all sentimental ties was complete. He died at about 8 p.m. on a warm September evening.

My father loved the gentle fragrance of *shefāli* flowers that bloom in autumn. In my garden a slender *shefāli* plant was in bloom. My wife gathered a few flowers in a small bowl and placed it on his bed. I recalled his lines in the poem he wrote on the death of Tagore.

> I did not offer you any flowers,
> I didn't see any flower shop on my way here.

His body was draped in khadi. He loved to wear khadi. No holy chants broke the quiet of his last journey.

Jatindranath's last poem 'Āsche Janme' was composed in February 1954, barely seven months before he died.

Āsche Janme

The winter sun
Glides past the open porch at Rohrabund.
On the road-side
The banyan leaves quiver in the fading sun.
Be it summer or winter,
They quiver.
The trunk gnarled and furrowed
Stands upright, deep in thought.
Be it winter or summer,
It's burdened with thoughts
Quaint and old, going back a century.

A milch-cow reclines
With its back in the fading sun;
Chews the cud
And looks vacantly with sleepy eyes.
What is there to worry
In the easeful life of a cow?
Cud in its jaws, and in the pen
Fodder and a frisky, new-born calf.

The hundred-year-old banyan
Stands unmoving at the same spot;
Its roots claw the soil,
Groping for sap
In the dark womb of the earth.
Standing erect and sleepless,

The tree sends its leaves tearing the sky
Clutching at light;
The branches flap their wings like mad
Lashed by storms.
The tree is restless,
And the trunk shackled, immobile.

The cow of the *sadgop* family
Is well-fed and gentle,
Its skin shining black.
Free to pace around and graze,
It can lash its tail and kill a gadfly;
Never pining for the unattainable,
Its life is a simple business of give and take
Milk for fodder.
Out in the field
In the fading winter sun,
It rests on a full stomach;
Chews the cud with eyes half-closed
In slothful ease.
Its limbs thrill with joy,
When the rope around its neck
Is let loose for a while.

Born a poor mortal in my present life,
My cup of *punya* is empty.
If I speak out the whole truth
It will hurt my friends,
And amuse my foes.
Hence I choose to keep it back.
Here at Rohrabund
There's no news of my closest friend.
He had been indeed my all-seeing lord.
If I chance to meet him
I would ask,
What kind of life is ordained
For my next birth?
A road-side banyan or a cow?
Indeed poor mortals like me
Are destined to be born next life
Either a banyan tree or a cow.

The poem is remarkable for more than one reason. When he wrote it at Rohrabund, he had a clear foreknowledge of his

coming death, but in the poem there is no hint of any fear. The tone is one of quiet acceptance of the inevitable. The defiant swagger of Browning's 'Fear death?' was alien to his nature. There is an element of playfulness in the title chosen. There is no indication that the poet shared the Hindu belief in the cycle of birth and rebirth; he makes use of this belief only to express in his characteristic manner a consistently held view that human life is essentially a state of bondage, with varying degrees of freedom. Another birth would mean another state of bondage, with the same old limits to freedom. For man there is neither any happy beyond nor any state of unfettered freedom here. He makes fun of the Hindu belief that the right measure of *punya* or merit earned here can release man from the seemingly endless cycle of birth and rebirth. The poem uses two metaphors for man's state of bondage—a well-fed cow basking in the winter sun and an old, stately banyan tree standing immobile at the same spot. The two metaphors are skilfully worked out, defining with profound irony the little freedom that man is permitted to enjoy. The cow is free to pace around and graze; it can lash its tail and kill a gadfly. This is one kind of human existence, the more familiar kind. This is the poet's ironic commentary on the kind of complacency he had noticed in most of us. It has many undertones and levels of meaning. The *sadgop* who owns the cow may be our social system, or a benevolent tyrant, or God. The old banyan tree represents another kind of life. Though its trunk is fettered, its roots claw the soil and restless leaves tear the sky. It is a symbol of a rebellious man straining at the leash. The poet is a spectator and his preference is not stated. At a different level the poem expresses the poet's lifelong quarrel with God.

> If I speak out the whole truth
> It will hurt my friends
> And amuse my foes.

Jatindranath's last poem is one of the finest specimens of his distinctive poetry, his wit, the racy, vivid diction with its homespun words and the adroit use of metaphor. The poem is a clear evidence that there was no decline in his poetic faculties although he was on the verge of death.

CHAPTER SIX

Summing Up

I said in my preface that the popular label of pessimism applied to his poetry is a little misleading. The poet was partly responsible for this. One of his early poems appearing in *Marushikhā* was entitled 'Dukhabādi'. Perhaps his readers took their cue from this, and in certain circles the label came to stay. In one of his later poems 'Sukhabhog' there is a jesting reference to this term. In his poetry, particularly the early poetry, he saw suffering as the most pervasive reality of life and he saw it intensely. Further, he could not accept the common religious–metaphysical view that suffering has a benign purpose. A good deal of his poetry is inspired by an intensely felt experience of suffering. His apprehension of suffering has another significant feature. It is neither any romantic agony nor any spiritual or existentialist anguish; it was something down-to-earth and felt in the flesh. In his later poetry this is occasionally compounded by a kind of spiritual anguish, but in the main body of his poetry suffering is this-worldly. When he renders his experience in poetic terms the tone is high-pitched, but even in his early poetry there is an interplay of jestful banter and a strongly felt emotion. His sarcasm is at moments abrasive, but quite often it is laced with an impish humour. This is not how a confirmed pessimist views life. There is an element of morbid compulsiveness in pessimism. Generally, sentimentality is the obverse of a morbid preoccupation with the seamy side of life. In Jatindranath's poetry there is neither any streak of morbidity nor any whining sentimentality. His wit—it came fairly close to the wit of the English metaphysicals—kept away sentimentality. It also rescued his poetry from the morbidity of pessimism.

Going to Jatindranath's poetry, I have often asked myself if he can be regarded as a religious poet. He is certainly not a religious poet in the accepted sense of the term. He lacked the simple, unquestioning faith in God that is the source of a great body of religious poetry; the rational frame of his mind pre-

cluded this kind of poetry. Job questioned the essential justice of the ways of God, but his doubt was silenced by a massive display of God's power. Milton, too, when blindness afflicted him, was assailed by doubt, but in the end he seemed to find comfort in a meek surrender to God. In 'Ghumer Ghore', the most ambitious poem written in his early period, Jatindranath questions the justice of the ways of God. The problem of man's unmerited suffering has been sharply defined, but the parallel with Job and Milton ends here. In 'Ghumer Ghore' there is no hint that he has found an answer, emotionally satisfying if not intellectually acceptable. He ridicules all our received views about God, all our theological answers to the problem of suffering. In a daring line in the final movement of the poem he makes fun of our Vedic and Upanisadic exercises as cultivating opium and hashish. And the image of God that he jestingly projects is that of a suffering being, the fount of all our suffering. In fact it is an admission that there is no answer to the riddle. But there is no hint in the poem that the idea of God is dispensable. He prefers to address God as his friend, who recurs again and again in his poetry; in his last poem too, the final verse paragraph is addressed to his friend. It is indeed strange that God should figure so persistently in the whole corpus of his poetry. The view held by certain critics that an agnostic in his early poetry he returns to the traditional faith in God in his later poetry, is unacceptable. He had never been an agnostic; in his later poetry there is a shift in tone and accent, not a return to a simple faith in God. I regard him as an unconventional religious poet who failed to reconcile a vigilant, rational mind with a deeply felt emotional need. This conflict finds expression in different accents, angry, petulant or mocking but never obsequious. I have used the phrase 'lover's quarrel' to describe the poet's strange relationship with God as expressed in his poetry. In his private life he was not a devout Hindu in the traditional sense, but what we glimpse of his inner life as mirrored in his poetry does suggest that God was not emotionally dispensable to him.

Jatindranath as a poet has been my main concern in writing this monograph. But a complete view of Jatindranath as an important figure in Bengali literature should include an examination of his prose writings. The limited scope of this

monograph rules out any detailed analysis of his prose. Hence I shall take a hurried look at the range and character of his prose writings. His first published prose was a satirical piece that came out in 1918 and his last was published in 1953. Which means that from 1918 onwards he did not cease to write prose till almost the end of his life.

His prose falls into two categories—literary criticism and satirical pieces, mostly light-hearted, on diverse subjects. As a critic he was not interested in abstract, theoretical problems of aesthetics. His *Kāvya-Parimiti* discussed in an earlier chapter is a book of practical criticism. His critical faculties were directed to a particular poem or a character in a particular novel; without any vague generalities he would examine it with his critical and psychological insight. His prose in this kind of writing is formal. He preferred the chaste style which he regarded as more suited to serious criticism. Bengali prose has two styles—the formal, chaste style termed in Bengali as *sādhu* style and the familiar style close to the spoken idiom termed as the *chalit* style. Tagore in his early period chose the chaste style, but changed over to the familiar style in his later writings. A lively debate on the two styles started in the thirties, but Tagore's later preference for the *chalit* style clinched the issue. Jatindranath could handle both styles, but in his later period seemed to prefer the familiar manner. The preface to the Bengali version of *Kumārasambhavam* is a good specimen of his chaste style, a little high-flown and ornate but never foggy. Fogginess is the bane of Bengali prose.

Jatindranath's critical essays of this kind are very few in number. I have recently edited a selection of his prose writings and I have noticed that he preferred to write satirical pieces on a wide range of subjects. A cursory look at the subjects he chose will convince any reader that he was no melancholy Jaques. Here is another image of the poet, a happy, quick-witted man enjoying his pleasantries. In his poetry we glimpse this image in sudden flashes, but there he is mostly a solitary. In his prose he is a different personality, cheerful and companionable.

Whether serious or light-hearted his prose is shaped and controlled by a highly organized, intelligent mind that gave to his poetry its distinctive, masculine character. Jatindranath excelled in polemical writing. In the thirties, when the old and the

new generation of writers clashed, Jatindranath joined in the fray; and his articles, mostly written in epistolary form, are good specimens of this kind of writing. He could be very pugnacious and abrasive when provoked. I may cite one instance. Sajani Das, the editor of *Shanibārer Chithi*, had a flair for satire, which he generally directed to the new generation of writers. In certain circles he was the most hated man. He was an admirer of Jatindranath, but in one of his flippant moods he satirized a poem of Jatindranath. In an ill-concealed innuendo he hinted that a particular image used by the poet was suggestive of sexual mating. A *double entendre* no longer shocks us, but the innuendo of Das enraged the poet. What he wrote in reply was a pungent attack on the scavenging instinct (as he put it) of Sajani Das. He chose innuendo as his weapon, but his indignation was controlled by a discerning intelligence.

He wrote a brief autobiographical note under a pseudonym. Written in an anecdotal style it is full of impish humour. The familiar manner chosen here gives an added piquancy to his prose.

Jatindranath's prose may be regarded as complementary to his poetry. Together they give us a complete view of the poet.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Man behind His Poetry

Jatindranath believed that the inner life of a poet as mirrored in his poetry is his true life and this alone should matter to his readers. He said in a letter to Sajani Das (referred to earlier) that a Bengalee poet's life has little to talk about. A reader is still curious to know the man behind his poetry, to see 'Shelley plain'. In this chapter I shall give a few details of the poet's life and character which, I believe, are not entirely irrelevant to his poetry.

Jatindranath seldom enjoyed a long spell of good health, but there was no trace of hypochondria in his character. He suffered from persistent insomnia and a nagging colic pain; in several poems there are playful allusions to these irritants. For the best part of his life he worked as the estate engineer of the Cossimbazar Raj Estate. The Raj property was spread over many districts of Bengal and parts of Bihar and the poet had to tour extensively, but he seemed to enjoy his outdoor work in spite of many irritating ailments. For one thing, the varied, down-to-earth experience of his outdoor life was the raw material of a good deal of his poetry.

He had always been a small eater and a complete teetotaller. He never smoked. Greed for food and drinks he considered as one of the deadly sins. His personal habits were clean and he hated any mark of slovenliness in domestic life. Unlike some of his friends he answered letters promptly, giving precise details. Once he rebuked his friend Kalidas Roy for not dating his letters. In his private life he was never effusive in his expression of affection.

As a poet he eschewed formal literary gatherings and seldom sent his poems for publication unless solicited. He loved music but had little interest in the fine arts. When in Calcutta, he would often go out to watch a game of cricket or a football match. A witty and vivacious talker in the company of close friends, he was not generally communicative to a stranger. To

a young literary aspirant calling on him—I remember in particular Bimal Ghosh and Subhas Mukherji—he was extremely affable and pleasant, but forthright in expressing his views on contemporary trends in literature. In his reading he was highly selective; he knew what he liked and never aimed to be versatile. *Chayanikā*, the first anthology of Tagore's verse edited by Prasanto Mahalanobis, was his bedside book. I have carefully preserved the well-thumbed copy of this book used by the poet.

Although sceptical about any special merit in plain living, his ambitions in worldly affairs were extremely low-keyed. Without any instinct for money-making, he left for his children only his good wishes and some reputation as a poet. (This is exactly what he said to me a few days before he died.) In one of his light-hearted poems, 'Gotā Kayek Tākā', he wrote:

> For want of a few more chips
> I have soured
> The sweet temper of my love.
> Alas, to my woe,
> For want of some more chips
> Weeds of bitter berry
> Grow rank in my jasmine garden.

A small table, a straight-backed chair and a small bookcase—this was the modest outfit of his 'poetry workshop'. He generally worked for two or three hours in the morning and it was his practice to hum his lines while composing a poem. He was a fastidious craftsman and the first draft wore a battered look after five or six days of revision. Even after publication he would often go back to the final draft and make a few changes. Before sending a poem to a journal he would read it out to his wife and an approving smile from her was the green signal for publication. Thus a Jatindranath poem, with its roots in an intense awareness of suffering, basked for a while in the genial warmth of happy domesticity before going out to the world outside.

The poet's ancestral home at Haripur, taken over by outsiders, wears a mournful look. The big hall with an imposing façade of arches and columns where our family used to hold different festivals is now a massive heap of rubbles. When I visited our home a couple of years ago, the present intruders

greeted me with an angry stare. The poet loved his village and in a few poems there are nostalgic references to it; but in his private talks there was no overt expression of any sentimental brooding over the past. I conclude this monograph with a few lines taken from his poem 'Āmār Basanta' (My Spring).

In my sojourns, brief or long,
Wherever I go,
I see my village
Surfacing before my eyes.
I see again
My people and neighbours,
Gentle or quarrelsome,
Living close together.
The dusty roads and gay festivals,
The *dol*, *rath* and *muharram*,
And the chattering small shopkeeper.
For my present life
This is, I own,
My whole world, my heaven.
When spring comes at my door
I see it afresh.

Spring is here;
The playful day, curly-haired
Hides behind the dark hair of the evening.
The moon comes out
And the darkness gently lifts.
I send my greetings to the world around;
This night, like a cosy envelope,
Will carry my card
Scented with mango blossoms
And stamped with the postmark of my village.

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