Jorasankor Dhare on Abanindranath Tagore's Personality and Works of Art

NEELIMA VASHISHTHA

Abanindranath Tagore's autobiography, *Jorasankor Dhare** published in Banga Samvat 1354 (A.D. 1947), was first dictated in Bengali language to Rani Chanda on the initiative of Rabindranath Tagore.[1] In nature and content, this work is conspicuously distinct from other autobiographies. The autobiography is notable in that the author, at the beginning of the work, testifies to its authenticity, saying that whatever was written in it, had been narrated by him and that he alone was responsible for any omissions. He had dictated the narrative at an advanced age when the events of the recent and distant past might get mixed up in the psychic memory of a person. But, in the foreword of the book, Abanindranath gives credit to Rani Chanda for earnestly recording—what was spoken to her—with clarity and detail and with an emotional involvement in the sad and happy events of his life. Nevertheless, he acknowledges (Thakur 1947:1) that his own narration was imbalanced as the joyful memories were liable to be forgotten or become hazy while the sad moments of life did leave an indelible imprint on the memory. At the beginning of the narration, Abanindranath accepts that when he starts reflecting on his life there is a flux of memories; and the images that come to him are so mixed up that it becomes difficult for him to keep a chronological track of events. As a result, he says, the incidents of the later part of his life tended to surface even as the earlier ones remained in the background.

Despite these limitations, the descriptions in the autobiography are clear, images are lifelike, colourful and passionate, and it will be easily conceded, that these images are vividly reflected in his creations in paint. He has, in his paintings, identified many characters, including the servants of the household and other acquaintances. Many events and moods, occurrences and emotions from the

storehouse of his psychic images have consciously or unconsciously crept into his paintings. His descriptions of childhood are full of the memories of school, of the Jorasanko household and the garden house of Champadani; and they also relate, in details, to the favours bestowed upon him by the servants in showing him the treasures of the forbidden portions of the house or in facilitating many other experiences specially of the festive occasions. Abanindranath seems to have imbibed these images vividly in his mind. When occasion arose, he used them faithfully in his compositions, just as he has narrated them in colourful visual imageries, in his autobiography.

As the narration by the artist in *Jorasankor Dhare* has not followed a chronological sequence, it may be necessary to re-trace the events of his life in order to analyse and establish a relationship between his imageries and the development in his creative expressions. We therefore, may make an attempt to briefly reconstruct a chronologically apt biographical sketch of the artist from the reminiscences and tributes of his contemporaries, friends, relatives and students.[2] Their impressions form an alternative source of information about the artist, for they in their time, perhaps could not have had access to his autobiography or perhaps, they did not deem it necessary to refer to it as they were witnesses to some of the events of his life, and had their own perceptions about those events. These notices of Abanindranath Tagore, offering new insights on him and his work, are independent of his own autobiographical narration and seem to add significantly to the accounts contained in the *Jorasankor Dhare.* Among such reminiscences and tributes to him, those coming from his students are full of reverence and unveil him as an ideal teacher and patron. Similar in vein are the opinions of his friends.

Of these friends and contemporaries, Mukul Chandra Dey and Jaimini Prakash Ganguly have authored the most authentic biographies of Abanindranath. Dey (1942: 28-35) makes a detailed biographical sketch of his life offering a chronological account of his creative work. Jaimini Prakash Ganguly, a nephew of Abanindranath and five years younger to him, had lived with the latter for thirteen years during his childhood, and his account of Abanindranath seems important for different reasons. Ganguly's [3] writings throw light on the efforts of Abanindranath in learning to paint on his own. The uncle and nephew seem to have gone on their different ways as the former pursued Indian art and the latter, becoming an adversary and critic of Abanindranath, eventually

devoted himself to learning European Academic art. Ganguly repented this 'deviation' at the fag end of his life when he realized the success that Abanindranath had achieved in pursuing Indian art, following a path opposite to him (Ganguly 1942: 16-21).

In making a critical evaluation of Abanindranath and his work, a few scholars [4] have referred to *Jorasankor Dhare*, his autobiography, but they have not tried to analyse the work given the proclivities of artist's psychic imageries and their relation to his creativity; or to know what the artist has to say about his creative work. These scholars have confined their account to the events that underline his achievements, his learning of the skill of painting and a chronological account of his contribution to the field of painting. No attempt has been made by any scholar to discover his life through his own narrative–the *Jorasankor Dhare*–though his autobiography remains a useful source for the purpose of appreciating the inner motivations of the artist. The study of *Jorasankor Dhare* is also significant because it helps in resolving some crucial issues which have been the points of debate among scholars in their attempt to trace his creative journey as he aspired to revive Indian tradition of art with, among other things, his painterly representation of many classical Sanskrit works.

Biographical Account

Abanindranath was born in Calcutta on August 7, 1871 at Jorasanko, the residence of the Tagore family. He was the youngest son of Gunendranath Tagore, and a grandson of Girindranath Tagore who was the second son of Dwarakanath Tagore. Gaganendranath and Samarendranath were his elder brothers. Abanindranath had inherited an inclination for literature and fine arts from his family. In 1864, Gunendranath and Jyotirindranath, Abanindranath's father and uncle, had joined the Art School at Calcutta and studied there for two years. Abanindranath's father had varied interests, such as, photography, botany, gardening and dramatic performances besides drawing. Abanindranath was sent, along with other children, to a normal school when he was five years of age. He never liked the routine of the school, and therefore, studied there with difficulty for three years. He passed class three and then dropped out because of his exasperation with the overly harsh behaviour of the English teacher (Thakur 1947: 16-17). After leaving the school, he became an avid lover of nature, devoted to observing it with interest and fascination. He studied at home and came to use the paint-box of his father to

draw pastoral scenes, objects and palm trees (Ganguly 1942: 17; Dey 1942: 31). When he was nine years old, the family of Gunendranath moved to another house at Champadani in Konnagar on the western bank of the Ganga. The house had a large garden spread over a hundred *bighas*. Here, he developed a great intimacy with nature and with animals of all sorts. His father died when he was 10 years old. Afterwards, the family returned to Jorasanko, and Abanindranath joined Sanskrit College at Calcutta where he studied Sanskrit between 1881 and 1890. While in the College, he started composing verses in Sanskrit and Bengali, illustrating them with line-drawings of decaying temples and landscapes.[5] Along with his studies in Sanskrit, he also continued receiving drawing lessons from one of his classmates: Anukula Chatterjee (Thakur 1947: 123). He also learnt the English language as a special student at the St. Xavier College, Calcutta. In 1889, he was married to Suhasini Devi. About this time, he took private lessons from two artists, Signor O. Ghilardi, an Italian and Charles Palmer, an Englishman, who were associated with the Government School of Art, Calcutta. The turning point in his creative career came with his painting of the *Kṛṣṇalila* series, and his meeting with E. B. Havell in 1897 (Thakur 1947: 124).

All these happenings are mentioned in the *Jorasankor Dhare*, but Abanindranath has not cared to narrate them in a chronological order. It can be explained by the fact that he was an artist, not a chronologist, and the making of his perceptions, imagination and visions have played a more important role in his autobiography. Apparently, a representation of an artist's imaginative life in his creative journey was more significant to him than a chronologically apt historical narrative with statements of the events of the life that he had lived.

Emergence of Abanindranath as an Artist

Jorasankor Dhare presents a vignette of mental images, which can be divided into three major phases to facilitate the study of the creative process of the artist. The first phase consists of descriptions of early childhood days, covering the period of his living in Jorasanko and going to school. The second phase includes the formation of images in his mind through his solitary communion with nature and sojourn at the garden house with the village folks. The third phase deals with his mature life as an artist at Jorasanko, revealing his profession as an artist, his techniques, ideology and the activities for the promotion of awareness and appreciation of Indian Art.

FIRST PHASE

The initial chapters of the *Jorasankor Dhare* contain reflections on the childhood perceptions of Abanindranath. These perceptions are graphic and vibrant and include descriptions with a childlike innocence. Such simplicity, as a gift of his intimate communion with nature, remained with him throughout his life and his autobiographical account is replete with glimpses of his intimate imageries. For instance, there is a lively word-picture in it of the rainy season (*vars--mangala*) and its impact on the life of people specially, how the rains continue and do not stop for days, how the baked mud-bricks of the roof crack down and start leaking, enforcing the shifting of children to the dancing hall along with their servants. There is a maid, who looks after him and other children, who is described as offering roasted gram as the only food available at that time. After the interruption of rain the atmosphere becomes very quiet, there is neither the chirping of birds, nor movement on the road, as it is flooded with rainwater. The vegetable hawker, the milkman, barber, etc., are not moving in the street. Life becomes still. There is also a picture, which he paints in later part of life, depicting a lonely bird sitting on the bare rock in the atmosphere of stillness and gloom, created by the havoc of rain. Also drawn graphically are the memories of school which are full of unhappy incidents, frustrations and disappointments, because of the rigid routine of learning methods followed there. The child Abanindranath was averse to classroom discipline but he was benefited by his exposure to the outside world on the way to school. It was his only chance to avail of the pleasantries of the outside world, as the children of Tagore family were not allowed to go out and play with their peers. He recalls having seen Kabuliwalas selling goods on his way to school.

Abanindranath also recollects the names of his teachers: Madhav Pandit who taught Sanskrit and Harnath Pandit who taught English and was harsh towards students. One Laksminath Pandit was dark and intimidating in appearance and was named as the *mahiṣa* of Durga by children. The experiences of drawing and alchemy lessons in school left a lasting impact on Abanindranath as they were associated with form and colour, the elements which were destined to be his companions for the whole of his life. The lessons in alchemy seemed interesting to him because the teacher demonstrated experiments to make the red water blue or blue water red. But the

drawing sessions were a disappointment for him as the teacher asked him to draw the same *surahi* and glass every day. That was his first step towards the lessons in drawing. He remembers his classmate Bhulu helping him in copying the tasks that were assigned to him (Thakur 1947: 9-10) as he entertained the hope of seeing the objects kept in the cupboard than sketching them from its display before him. Among these objects, there was a ship also, and he imagined that he may one day become the captain of a ship and might go to far off lands, also fancying that perhaps the teacher would give that ship to him as a prize for his performance in the class. All this remained a wishful thinking and, since no such thing happened, he felt disappointed. Thereafter, for three years he learned nothing and passed his time with great difficulty. At last, he stopped going to school in class three because of the harsh punishment meted out by a teacher. In the circumstances, arrangements were made for his study at home.

After leaving the school, he gained freedom to contemplate and to live in the natural surroundings at his own will without any constraint of a regular schedule. This provided him opportunity to observe nature, living in its midst, and see rural life (Thakur 1947: 16). He could observe the changes brought in by the turn of the seasons and the time of the day, such as the changes in shade of the jackfruit tree (*kaṭahal*), which turns darker in the moonlight than in the day.

In the Tagore household, he had seen many curios and drawings, which left a lasting imprint on his psyche. He refers to the paintings made by Jyotirindranath and Gunendranath his uncle and father, respectively (Thakur 1947: 18-19). He had also seen a painting representing the volcano of Visuvius in oil on a canvas on the table of Dwarakanath (Thakur 1947: 30) and the instruments brought from South Kensington, London in his father's room. His father had decorated the room with oil paintings, marble-topped ebony furniture, a bronze fountain with female figures, and a metal figure of a child with upraised arms, imported from Britain. These objects had served as objects of study in pencil in the early days of the artist, Abanindranath. Besides, he was captivated by the objects he had seen in the storeroom of the house, where Nanda Farrash used to keep lamps, brooms, etc., and which was only opened by him in the evening and morning. The storeroom appeared to the child artist as a fairy land (*pariloka*). There were, in it, old chandeliers, furniture and antiques inside glass cupboards with layers of dust. The room

was solitary and quiet but he imagined hearing the sound of tinkling bells, as if from a fairy's anklets. The rays of sunlight coming through cracks of windows were transformed into rainbows. But when his reverie was disrupted by the harsh voice of Nanda Farrash, he found himself like a boy lost in a jungle.[6] Such were his imaginations when he was a child of the tender age of five or six years.

His curiosity had no limit; as a result the toys were ruined and shattered. He refers to the sculptures and paintings he had seen namely, pictures of *Kṛṣṇalīlā*, Śakuntalā, destruction of Kāmadeva and terracotta figures from Krisnanagar. The inquisitiveness was not only applied to see the inside of toys, ink stands and sculptures by breaking them but he used to observe the carpenters, masons and potters at work.

These images of his childhood appeared after a long interval in his paintings when he had achieved control over the techniques of painting. For instance, there was a *kathak* in the Jorasanko house whom he remembers and paints as if to revive the memories of childhood. The *kathak* was known as Mahim Kathak. He performed rituals and recited *Bhāgavat* and *Rāmāyaṇa*. He always wore a red shawl and a silver ring (Thakur 1947: 43). Abanindranath later, made a painting representing the image of *kathak* though he had seen him at the age of seven. Then, there was an old woman, who used to come to their house with the maid Padmadasi and sang devotional songs. She was dark in complexion having a round face bedecked with a big round red *bindi* on her forehead. She too has found place in one of Abanindranath's paintings entitled, "Old Toys".

SECOND PHASE

The major part of Abanindranath's mental images crystallized during his solitary stay in the *bagan badi*, the garden house at Champadani. He narrates that there were many pets in the house, such as, a dog, a kakatoo, and several deers and monkeys. He used to pass the long afternoons loitering in the garden, observing the pets and other animals with leisure. The acquaintance with the garden became so intimate and intense that he knew the birds and their nests, the locations of the shadows of trees, the passing objects on the wall and the places of lizards lying in wait to catch a fly, etc. There was no distraction here of any kind to disturb his attention. He was so lonely that sometimes he used to fight with his own shadow. These experiences were so engrossing that he forgot the pain of loneliness

caused by his leaving the school and Jorasanko. This routine made his perceptions sharp, brilliant, discriminating, lively and interesting. He could hear the vultures, or study their ways of hovering in circles, or sitting on the wall, shrieking and taking off. Among his paintings of later days, the studies of a monkey relaxing on the back of goat, deers, dogs and vultures[7] are noteworthy (Thakur 1947: 16). They are known as "Playmate Series", which was painted in 1916 (Pl. No.1). These paintings were an outcome of the visual impressions which he had assimilated at a very early age during his solitary stay with nature at the garden house in Champadani.

His intense perception of colours and sounds was a result of this solitary life at Champadani. The varying shades of colours in the late hours of evening from bright reddish to vermillion, violet and blue had been printed on his mental images long before he learnt the use of brush and water colours (Thakur (1947: 20). The garden with its tall shady trees, birds and insects was his pal in these lonely hours. Similarly, his perceptions of sound were intense and acute; he knew that the voices of flower-sellers and ice-vendors were heard in the evening and the pulling of water from wells in the afternoon. He could hear a sound travelling through the street from one corner to other, increasing and receding in intensity and also differentiate between the notes of the violin and piano played by his uncles. All these perceptions were transformed later in his paintings, songs, stories, and sculptures. These varied perceptions enriched his mental images, as if, in imbibing them unconsciously he was preparing himself to become a great artist.

THIRD PHASE

The sojourn of Abanindranath at Champadani garden house provided him with varied types of experiences, forms and images, which compelled him, as it were, to express himself. But his solitude was terminated by the sudden demise of his father and his return to Jorasanko, and also with the end of his cheerful childhood days. The seventh chapter of the *Jorasankor Dhare* very passionately presents the nostalgia he feels for the bygone days. He had grown, and married and, above all, the death of his father had transformed him into a mature person. He compares the memories of childhood with the dewdrops on a lotus leaf, which evaporate with the midday sun, and says that grief converts the dewdrops on a lotus leaf into tears, which will last longer. This simile forms the subject matter of

one of the painting of Abanindranath representing a lady visualizing the drops of tears on a lotus leaf. Similarly, he expressed his grief and sadness at the death of his father in the famous painting entitled, 'Death of Shah Jahan', which was awarded a silver medal in 1903 in an exhibition at Delhi. (Pl. No.2). In this picture, he identifies his own grief at the death of his father and projects it through the daughter of Shah Jahan. During the last days of imprisonment, Shah Jahan was allowed the company of his daughter. Abanindranath perceives in Shah Jahan, the dying image of his father.

He accepts that the psyche of an artist keeps on collecting and conserving images in memory and projects them at the opportune moment (Thakur 1947: 54). For instance, the painting of a 'Santhal woman' depicts the hair-do with flowers in the manner he had seen his mother arrange that for the young ladies of the house. His paintings of the *Kṛṣṇalīlā* series were inspired by the songs of a *Vaiṣṇavī* in his house. There are many characters such as, the incense-seller, or Gabriel, who comes to life in his paintings, wearing a unique dress: a loose long coat (*achakan*) with half cut sleeves and having bright buttons on it. Gabriel was a Jew, and his dress reminded Abanindranath of Shylock of Shakespear's *Merchant of Venice*. Abanindranath depicts Aurangzeb in the same dress in his painting entitled, 'Aurangzeb with Dara's head'. This painting was done in 1905, perhaps translating into the appearance of Aurangzeb the cruelty in the character of Shylock, a Jew himself. Similarly, the series of paintings of the 'Arabian Nights' depict dresses and other outfits of figures which Abanindranath had seen in the Kabuliwalas sitting outside his school or coming to his house for selling antique goods and other things.

II

Beliefs and Ideology

Abanindranath achieved mastery over Sanskrit literature and on *silpa* texts, and developed his own style of painting. And, in his autobiography, he liberally shares experiences of his creative life and spirituality. He considers the art of painting similar to that of writing, saying that the brush is first dipped in water then in colour, then in the subconscious of the artist and, then alone, he is able to draw and paint, as the fusion of subconscious (imagination), colour and brush goes to make a good painting (Thakur 1947: 72).

According to Abanindranath, if the subconscious is not involved while painting, the picture will remain incomplete; and the same applies to music, as the saying goes: *antara bajatā hai to jantara bajatā hai*. Abanindranath believed that the transferring of the images of subconscious becomes essential in painting at a particular point of time and achieving that makes him feel lighter and happier. To him, if the object is not touched by the beats of the heart, the art becomes meaningless. He accepted that the younger artists start their work from a direct representation of nature or from drawing anything, but it is the emotional involvement and sensitivity that provides maturity, solemnity, softness and depth to the creations of an artist. To create an effect with minimum use of colour and effort depends on this kind of maturity of an artist. He substantiated it by referring to the Japanese technique of handling of brush and colour (Thakur 1947: 72).

In his autobiography, Abanindranath compares the profession of artist to that of a *yogi* with only one difference that while the former sees with open eyes and concentrates, the latter sees with closed eyes and reflects (Thakur 1947: 101). Abanindranath had practised this process of *samādhi* unconsciously, looking continuously and quietly at the sky and was able to see images that he wished to draw. He recalls the joy he experienced from the practice of *yoga* and achieved the state of complete communion with nature in the later period of his life. He relates two incidents of his life. Once when he was painting the *Kṛṣṇalīlā* series and again when, after the death of his mother, he recalled her image to make her portrait. He relates the experience of his togetherness with the object of his painting. When he was working on the *Kṛṣṇalīlā* series his consciousness identified them with Lord Kṛṣṇa and he used to see Kṛṣṇa moving around him, performing the *līlās*. He says,

> It was when I was doing the Krishnalila series that I experienced it for the first time. A perfect identity was established between myself and my theme. I would see Krishna passing before my mind's eye in all his lilas from boyhood up and my brush would move to itself and the pictures in all the details of line and colour produced themselves on the paper (Ghosh 1942:14).

All the incidents of Kṛṣṇa's childhood came before his mind's eyes as if he were watching a colourful film, and he remained engrossed in it till the series was completed. (Pl. Nos. 3, 4). Similarly, when he wished to paint the portrait of his mother, her image even along with the wrinkles on her face, appeared before his eyes. Impatiently, he

started drawing the image on the paper but the apparition disappeared. He concentrated on her image again, and became successful. The image of the mother became visible, and it stabilized in his inner vision till he could complete the portrait. He states,

> The vision was at first hazy and I saw the face like one sees the setting sun through a mass of cloud and then the face gradually took shape until it shone clear and perfect in every detail. Then the picture gradually vanished leaving the likeness stamped in my mind. I transferred it to paper and it was the best study of a face I have ever done (Ghosh 1942: 14).

Afterwards, he practised this experience with other objects and persons and could successfully draw without the physical presence of the person. He tried it in drawing the portraits of Rabindranath, Moti Budho,[8] Akshaya Babu and Jamuna[9] and could complete each of these portraits in two hours. He accepts that a communion with the object and clarity of perception is possible with continuous practice and singularity of purpose (Thakur 1947: 134-5). He remembers that when he was at Champadani, whatever he saw in the day he could recall the images in the night (Thakur 1947: 27). He also cautions the artists not to be disappointed if they fail to attain such a skill in the beginning, as it could be achieved only by the training of consciousness. Further, he explains that it is like a wind; when it starts blowing, it will go on and remain for a longer spell and bring good results for the artist. The period of such spells of trance in Abanindranath's life were known to his friends especially to Havell who never disturbed him on such occasions. The beauty and spiritual glow that we see in his paintings was the outcome of his sensitive soul and his singularity of purpose in life.

Abanindranath was sincere in pursuing his technique and impressions in his work. He mentions his association with two Japanese, but some scholars allege that he has copied their style. This allegation is unfounded and unjustified. From his narration it appears to be a case of mutual interaction. He accepts that the technique of wash is very effective in creating an emotional, romantic and gloomy atmosphere, and also relates his innovative experiments with this technique. The Japanese artist, Vokoyama Taikan always drew imaginary sketches on his palm just to remember them and to make a permanent impression, while his associate Shunso Hishida was fond of collecting pebbles to extract colours. They shared the studio of Abanindranath and made pictures on order to earn their living. Taikan used very little colour and applied minimum brush

strokes to create the desired effect, which attracted the attention of Abanindranath. Taikan demonstrated the use of brush with a swift and soft hand, and washes of water to create the effect. In turn, he learnt from Abanindranath the technique of Mughal painting (Thakur 1947:108). But Abanindranath always believed that technique is only a means to achieve an end i.e., a medium to transfer completely and sincerely the mental image into an external form. He subscribes to the view that an artist is free to adopt any technique just as he is free to make experiments with other techniques. He is the only judge to decide a technique for his work. Abanindranath always encouraged this freedom in his pupils. He never imposed his technique on them, and gave them freedom to experiment, infusing them with self-confidence. It is for this reason that the Bengal School could develop and transform itself to a meaningful modernity.

The autobiography by Abanindranath reflects his temperament. He was passive in attitude, contented in temperament, and truthful to himself. He acknowledges that if he had achieved something it was because of the continuous stimulation of E.B. Havell, John Woodroffe [10] and Rabindranath Tagore. He was reluctant in accepting the offer of the post of Vice-Principal of the Government School of Art, Calcutta. It was on the persuasion of Havell that he accepted the assignment. He expresses his gratitude to Havell who was also his teacher, who kindled his interest in Indian tradition of art.

In his autobiography, Abanindranath has referred to the activities of Indian Society of Oriental Art in detail with a view to express his gratitude to the members for upholding the cause of Indian art. He remembers all the members—British and Bengalis, merchants, civilians, common people, artists, Rajas, Judges, etc.—who contributed in their own ways in the development of a new school of Indian art. These were like-minded people, belonging to different groups, religious sects and countries, contributing towards one common cause. Abanindranath passionately comments on the efforts of John Woodroffe, who prepared the catalogues of exhibitions which formed a critical literature, containing his meaningful comments and notes. He refers to the First National Exhibition organized by the Society at Calcutta, which proved a great success because of the untiring zeal of John Woodroffe. The Society extended equal patronage to arts and crafts by organizing exhibitions, publishing an art Journal and running a School of Art. [11]

Abanindranath also remembers his friends with appreciation for their help and encouragement in developing the school of Indian

painting in Bengal. Among them, the foremost were E.B. Havell, Thronton[12] and Sister Nivedita (Thakur 1947:92). He had great regard for sister Nivedita for her patronage to his students, Nandalal Bose, Asit Kumar Haldar and Surendranath Gupta as she deputed them to the team of Lady Herringham for copying the paintings at Ajanta (1909 - 11). Besides, he expresses his heartfelt gratitude to his second elder aunt on the paternal side, for her important role in inspiring him to start printing, painting and writing. She got installed a litho printing press for him and paid tuition fees of Rs. 20 per lesson enabling him to join a painting class at the studio of Signor O. Ghilardi, an Italian artist (Thakur 1947: 124). Abanindranath learnt the oil pastel technique of making portraits and nature studies from this European artist for six months. Under this European influence, he set up his studio with a direction light flow from the north according to the western pattern, but at the same time, in pursuance of the Indian tradition he started illustrating *Citrāngadā,* a dance drama, written by Rabindranath. *Citrāngadā* and *Bālak* magazine[13] were printed with his illustration from their press at Jorasanko. He considered these illustrations as his first successful attempt at painting.

Similarly, he expresses gratitude to his uncle Rabindranath who could recognize his talents of story telling and sensitivity for poetry. On the suggestion of Rabindranath he had started writing literature for children and illustrating *Vaiṣṇava Padāvalī* of Vidyapati. He used to visualize the poems with his own sensitive intuition and creating a mental image before painting it on paper. The word-picture created by the poet served as a source of inspiration in the formation of that image. But his painting was not merely a translation of the word-picture. He continued to read literature and engaged a *pandit* for translation of the Sanskrit texts of Kalidasa, *Rāmāyaṇa, Mahābhārata,* etc., for his students. His paintings are based on several literary works such as *Vetāla Pañcaviṃśati, Meghadūtam* and *Ṛtusaṃhāra.* But his paintings do not appear as mere illustrations, as he tries to catch the same spirit of the poet, and represents it in the same manner to evoke the *rasa* (sentiment).

As an artist he enriched his mental collection of images as he travelled to distant places like Mussourie, Darjeeling, Puri and Konark (Bhubaneshwar). These travels had a great impact on his work and creativity. He was overjoyed to see the ocean and the *śikhara*s of the temples of Puri and Konark; some of the images assimilated during this period could be identified from his paintings. The painting of *kājari* dance was drawn after he saw some girls

dancing near a tree at the Commissioner's garden party, to which he was invited during his stay in Puri. The paintings entitled, 'Devadasi' reminds of the *devadāsīs* he had encountered in the temple of Puri. The memories of the *kajari* dance and also of the *devadasis* seen at the temple stayed with him and were relived when he came back to Calcutta. In Mussourie, he used to wake up early in the morning and covering himself with a blanket he would sit outside his house hearing the birds sing as he waited for the sunrise. He observes that 'the birds in the cities do not sing but cry, while in the jungle, undisturbed, they sing beautifully'. When in Mussourie he also saw a Pahadi girl with a pitcher coming down a hill to collect water from a stream. He drew a painting of this Pahadi maiden depicted as a Bhotia girl when he returned after his walk. The creative journey of Abanindranath as a painter came to an end with his drawings of the 'Omar Khayyam' and 'Arabian Nights' series of paintings. In his old age, he continued to devote his creative urge in writing the scripts of *jātrā* and making small toys.

Nature or life occurs not in the ordinary sense of their representations in his paintings. The analysis of his subconscious images and their visual representation indicates that to him, representation meant the transfer of his mental vision and images on to the paper. There always was an interlude of several years between the images conceived in his mind and their depiction in a painting in an evolved visual form whether in whole or in part. These images encompassed a wide variety including landscapes, historical and literary themes and compositions, and portraits too. Abanindranath never copied any form directly from the external world. He is criticised by scholars because in his paintings he did not adhere to the principles of *śilpa* texts which he advocated in his lectures (Mukherjee 1942: 105-118). The allegation does seem justified if his paintings and his discourses are closely examined together. His studies of nature, animals and human figures truthfully represent anatomical form, proportion and character of the subjects. And, his capacity of retention coupled with his keen observation for hours and days together endowed him with the felicity to draw those objects in a manner one would do from a direct observation of the object.

In his discourse on the Indian anatomy or on the canons of painting,[14] he claims his adherence to them. He had very minutely read the *śilpa* texts on *tālamāna,* the science of measurement in human anatomy, and he believed that aesthetic principle is the fulfillment of art, and that it should not be taken as rigid, absolute

and inviolable. He believed that the treatises and aesthetic canons were made for the continuation of the tradition and not to stifle the freedom of expression. According to him, the *Śāstras* are guiding principles for a student of art serving like a guide who takes a devotee to a temple through its portals, arches and *maṇḍapas*. When the god or divinity of the temple reveals itself, the arches, portals and guide cease to exist. The *Śāstric* principles are not made to extinguish the expressions and creativity just as artistic creativity is not a stagnant pool of water but a flowing stream which carves her own banks (Tagore 1961: 29-30).

Abanindranath believed that the *śilpa* texts were composed with a spirit of freedom from the rigid bonds in order to attain the realm of joy which is the final goal of all arts. He has quoted a number of verses from the *Śukranīti,* where it is clearly said that all images are not meant for worship. It explains that the *tālamāna,* `*dhyāna*, the descriptions of attributes and *vāhanas* are to be strictly adhered to only in case of those images, which are meant for worship. As regards the other images, the artist is free to follow his own artistic instinct.[15]

Abanindranath had quoted the text of *Śukranīti* of Śukrācārya[16] where he specifically says that in the text, the section on *tālamāna* was composed only for the purpose of carving of those images which are meant for worship. It says, *sevya sevakabhāveṣu pratimālakṣaṇam smṛtam.* The text also explains that, there are eight types of images, made of sand, rice flour, liquid paste, clay, wood, stone and metal besides those painted with colours. Among these images, those painted *(citra)*, or made of liquid paste, sand, clay and rice-flour are exempted from *Śastric* injunctions and they may not be considered as defective if they avail freedom of expression or do not abide by the rules.

Pratimā saikatī paiṣṭī lekhyā lepyā ca mṛṇmayī
Vārkṣī pāṣānadhātūtthā sthirā jñeyā yathottarā
Lekhyā lepyā saikatī ca mṛṇmayī paiṣṭikī tathā
Etāsām lakṣaṇābhave na kaiścid doṣa īritaḥ.
(Śukrācārya *c.* 800: IV. 4.72, 152)

The text also dwells upon the idea of a beautiful image and on the freedom of artist. It says that perfect beauty is rare indeed; but the images, which are rendered according to the standard laid down by *Śastra* alone, are beautiful. It further says that according to learned men, nothing can be called perfect unless it has the sanction of the *Śastra*, or, as others would insist on that being beautiful and perfect to which one's heart may cling.

Sarvāngaissarvaramyo hi kaścillakṣe prajāyate
Śāstramānena yo ramyaḥ sa ramyo nānya eva hi
Ekeṣāmeva tadramyam lagnam yatra ca yasya hṛt
Śāstramānavihīnam yadaramyam tat vipaścitam.
(Śukrācārya *c.* 800: IV, 4, 104-5)

The *Śukranīti* allows such a freedom of expression to artists repeatedly which shows the flexibility of the *Śāstric* injunctions with regard to the norms about images and paintings. For instance, it says that a violation of the prescribed code of measurements for an image would not bring about ill consequences if the worshipper likes it. The artist is thus allowed latitude to make an image according to his own artistic instinct: *pratimāṃ kalpayet śilpī yathā rucyaparaiḥ smṛtaḥ.* (Śukrācārya IV.4.154), and *pratimāyaśca ye doṣaḥ hyarcakasya tapobalāt sarvatreśvaracittasya nāsaṃ yanti ksaṇāt kila."*(Śukrācārya IV.4.159-60).

The historical and literary themes of the paintings of Abanindranath were a result of his wide reading of literature and Indian history during the third phase of his life, when he was a student of Sanskrit College and St. Xavier College at Calcutta. He has approached these themes through his literary sensibility and nationalistic fervour fanned by the *swadeshi* movement and by the wave of the cultural renaissance.

In the treatment of paintings based on literary and historical texts, Abanindranath's approach was to concentrate on the representation of *bhāva*, the sentiment or emotions expressed in the theme. He selects landscapes, backgrounds of paintings, human figures and other forms from his imagination according to his vision of the theme. Such a vision may not necessarily and always have coincided with the vision of the poet but he thought that giving vent to his own vision of it would facilitate evoking the spectator's empathy. He believed that the guiding principle for an artist should always be the creation of artistic grace and sentiment, which is also described in the Indian canons of painting as *bhāva* and *lāvaṇya*. The remaining elements namely, the different form, proportion, verisimilitude, colours and technique (*rūpabheda, pramāṇa, sādṛśya* and *varṇikābhanga*) are secondary and serve as tools which the artist uses to express his inner vision regarding that *bhāva*. In this context, verisimilitude would mean conformity with inner form, proportion would be according to the pictorial space and mode of applying the colour would be decided by the emotion or the content. These terms

are also used to represent real life but in painting and other visual arts it is the imaginative content that has to be presented through these tools. Thus, Abanindranath's analysis of the traditional canons and their use in practice opened a new vista for the artist where there would be no confrontation between tradition and modernity. It is this freedom of experimentation given by the *śilpa* texts that led to modern experiments in Indian art.

REFERENCES

Dandekar R.N. and A.L.Basham (1963) *Sources of Indian Tradition*, New Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass.

Dey, Mukul (1942), "Abanindranath Tagore-A Survey of the Masters life and Work", *The Visva Bharati Quarterly,* (Abanindra Number), Vol. 8, Parts 1-2, pp. 28.37.

Ganguly, Jaimini Prakash (1942), "Early Reminiscences", *The Visva Bharati Quarterly,* (Abanindra Number), Vol. 8, Parts 1-2, pp. 16-21.

Ghosh, K. (1942), "The Making of an Artist", *The Visva Bharati Quarterly,* ((Abanindra Number), Vol. 8, Parts 1-2, pp.7-15.

Gopal, Lallanji (1965) *The Economic Life of Northern India 700–1200 A.D.*, New Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass.

Mazumdar, B.P. (1960) *Socio Economic History of Northern India,* Kolkata: Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyaya.

Misra Jagadish Chandra, ed., tr. (1998) *Sukraniti*, Varanasi: Chowkhamba Surabharati Prakashan.

Mitter, Partha (1994), *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India 1850-1992*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mukherjee, Benodebehari (1942), "The Art of Abanindranath Tagore," *The Visva Bharati Quarterly,* ((Abanindra Number), Vol. 8, Parts 1-2, pp. 105-118.

Parimoo, Ratan (1973) *The Paintings of the Three Tagores—Abanindranath, Gaganendranath, Rabindranath,* Baroda: Maharaja Sayajirao University, pp. 72-86.

Ray, Niharranjan (1972), *An Approach to Indian Art*, Chandigarh: Publication Bureau, Punjab University.

Sukracharya (*c.* 800 AD), *Sukraniti,* ed., Jagadish Chandra Misra, (1998), Varanasi: Chowkhamba Prakashan.

Thakurta, Tapati Guha (1992), *The Making of a 'New' Indian Art,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 226-242.

Tagore A.N. (1942), "Sadanga or The Six Limbs of Painting," *Visva Bharati Quarterly* (Abanindra Number), 8,1-2, pp. 46-62. It was reprinted in this volume from the *Modern Review,* October 1915.

Thakur, Abanindranath and Rani Chanda (1947), *Jorasankor Dhare*, Santiniketan: Visva Bharati.

NOTES

*The author is extremely grateful to Mrs. Sumita Bhattacharya for her help in translation and reading the complete text of *Jorasankor Dhare* and for her valuable suggestions in identifying certain persons, places, flowers, etc., mentioned in the text.

1. Thakur, Abanindranath and Rani Chanda (1947).
2. The biographical sketches written by Kanti Ghosh, Jaimini Prakash Ganguly, Nandalal Bose, Mukul Dey, Bireshwar Sen, Ramanand Chatterjee, Binode Behari Mukherjee and others have been published in the 'Abanindra Number', *Visva Bharati Quarterly*, Vol. VIII, Parts I and II, (May-October 1942). Besides, some relevant portions of the *Jorasankor Dhare* text about Taikan, Okakura, Sister Nivedita and Rabindranath Tagore have been translated in English by Kshitish Roy, Cf. Pulin Behari Sen, ed., (1961) *Abanindra Nath Tagore*, Calcutta: Indian Society of Oriental Art, (Golden Jubilee Volume), pp. 40-48.
3. Jaimini Prakash Ganguly also attended the classes of Charles Palmer to learn academic oil painting and later on, joined as the Vice-Principal of the Government School of Art at Calcutta, after the resignation of Abanindranath from this post because of his differences with the Principal, Percy Brown. Cf. Partha Mitter (1994), pp. 275, 314.
4. Among the later scholars could be named Prof. Ratan Parimoo, (1973); Partha Mitter, (1994), pp. 272-273; Tapati Guha Thakurta, (1992).
5. Abanindranath got a prize for composing verses in Sanskrit on the Goddess of learning: Sarasvati. He learnt sketching and making line drawings of Goddess Laksmi and Sarasvati, from one of his class mates, Anukula Chatterjee at Sanskrit College, Kolkata. Cf. Mukul Dey, (1942), p. 31; Thakur and Chanda, (1947), p. 123.
6. Abanindranath has referred to a painting of Rabindranath which was exhibited in the school of Mukul Dey. The painting represented a boy lost in the jungle. Thakur and Chanda (1947) p. 21.
7. A girl came from the house of Shyam Mallick. She brought with her a pet dog. Abanindranath was attracted by it and observed its activities minutely. Later on, it was painted in the Playmate series. Abanindranath also painted a vulture many times. Two studies of the bird are preserved in the collection of Rabindra Bharati Society, Calcutta and the bird also figures in a composition entitled, "Vulture on a Temple Pinnacle" which was exhibited in the Exhibition of Indian paintings in Paris. The painting was unique and attracted attention for its intimate and symbolic idealism and representation of rare and penetrating strength of the bird. Cf. Parth Mitter (1994), Pl.No.166. Similarly, a pair of deer was represented in the 'Playmate' series and one deer was represented in the mural of Kacha and Devayani.
8. Moti Budho was a servant of the Tagore famil. For details, see, Thakur and Chanda (1947) p. 120.

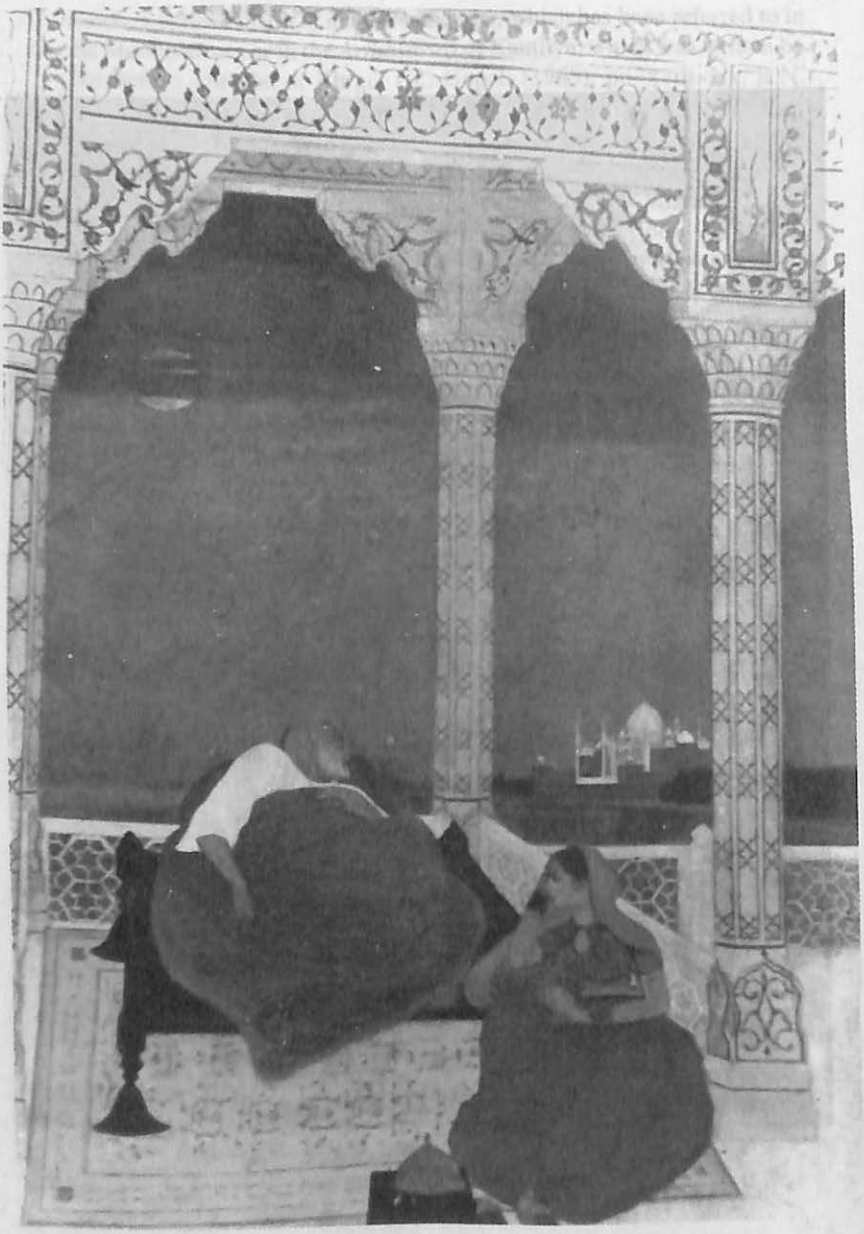
9. Akshaya Babu is Akshaya Kumar Maitra. He was the Director, Varendra Research Society, Rajshahi, East Bengal. He was a regular visitor to Tagores' house. Jamuna was the daughter of Nandalal Bose.
10. John Woodroffe was a judge. He had a personal collection of Japanese prints, which were exhibited in the exhibition of Indian Society of Oriental Art.
11. The Indian Society of Oriental Art was established in 1907. The idea of establishing a Society originated from Bangiya Kala Samsad which was founded by Abanindranath in 1905. It started as an art club at the Art School where artists and critics, both Europeans and Indians, met regularly in the evening to discuss various aspects of Indian art. The Indian Society of Oriental Art regularly organized exhibitions in Kolkata till 1919. One national exhibition was organized at Allahabad in 1911 and, one abroad at Paris through the efforts of Andree Karpeles. The Victoria and Albert Museum, London also had this exhibition. Exhibitions were also arranged in Tokyo and Chicago in 1915. The exhibition of 1916 was moved to Madras (now Chennai) on the invitation of Annie Besant and James Cousins, who was a regular contributor to the *Rupam,* an art journal of the Society,
12. Edward Thronton was an Engineer in the Martin Company and a member of the Indian Society of Oriental Arts and he purchased paintings from the exhibitions of the Society. He was also a landscape painter. Abanindranath used to visit him daily to see and discuss the proposed architectural plans of Calcutta. Thronton painted landscapes of Udaipur, Jaipur, etc., in Indian style.
13. The *Balak* magazine with illustrations and line drawings of Abanindranath was printed from Jorasanko Litho Press. His aunt had seen him working on his own, copying the drawings and objects, and making line drawings for the magazine, *Svapna Prayana*. It is to be noted that after the death of Gunendranath the family became dependent on the elder brother. Abanindranath was the youngest male child who was not settled yet.
14. Tagore A.N. (1942) pp. 46-62. Similarly, the lectures on " Canons of Indian Painting and Indian Artistic Anatomy" were delivered by him as a Bagesvari Professor and originally published in Bengali in *Probashi* and *Bagesvari Prabandhmala*. Later, these were translated in English and published in the Golden Jubilee Volume of Indian Society of Oriental Art, Calcutta in 1961.
15. N.R. Ray also subscribes to the same view. According to him *murti* means visual form of the mental image while the word *pratima* indicates a form made after the actual or given measurement. Hence, the images for the purpose of worship were made according to a definite *dhyāna* of the deity while other images were made according to the artistic instinct of the artist. Cf. Ray, Niharranjan (1972: 132-148).
16. The date of the *Śukranīti* is a matter of debate among the scholars. Some

scholars believe that it is not the same text, which has been referred to in the *Mahābhārata* or in the *Arthaśāstra* of Kauṭilya, which was written by Śukrācārya, the son of Bhṛgu. Cf., Gopal, (1965), pp. xviii–xix. R.N. Dandekar and A.L. Basham (1963: 240) who ascribed it to A.D. 800 have remarked that the work is notable for its detailed treatment of the administrative machinery, foreign relations, military policy and iconographic rules. On the basis of internal evidences Misra dates the *Śukranīti* between the post-Gupta and the pre-Harṣa periods. Cf., Misra, (1998), pp. 8–10. The *Nītikalpataru* of Kṣemendra quotes 10 verses from the work of Śukrācārya, which have been traced to the printed edition of the *Śukranīti*. According to Mazumdar (1960: x-xi), this mention of the work by an author writing in the middle 11th century may be taken as a positive evidence of the existence of the work in the A.D. 11th century.

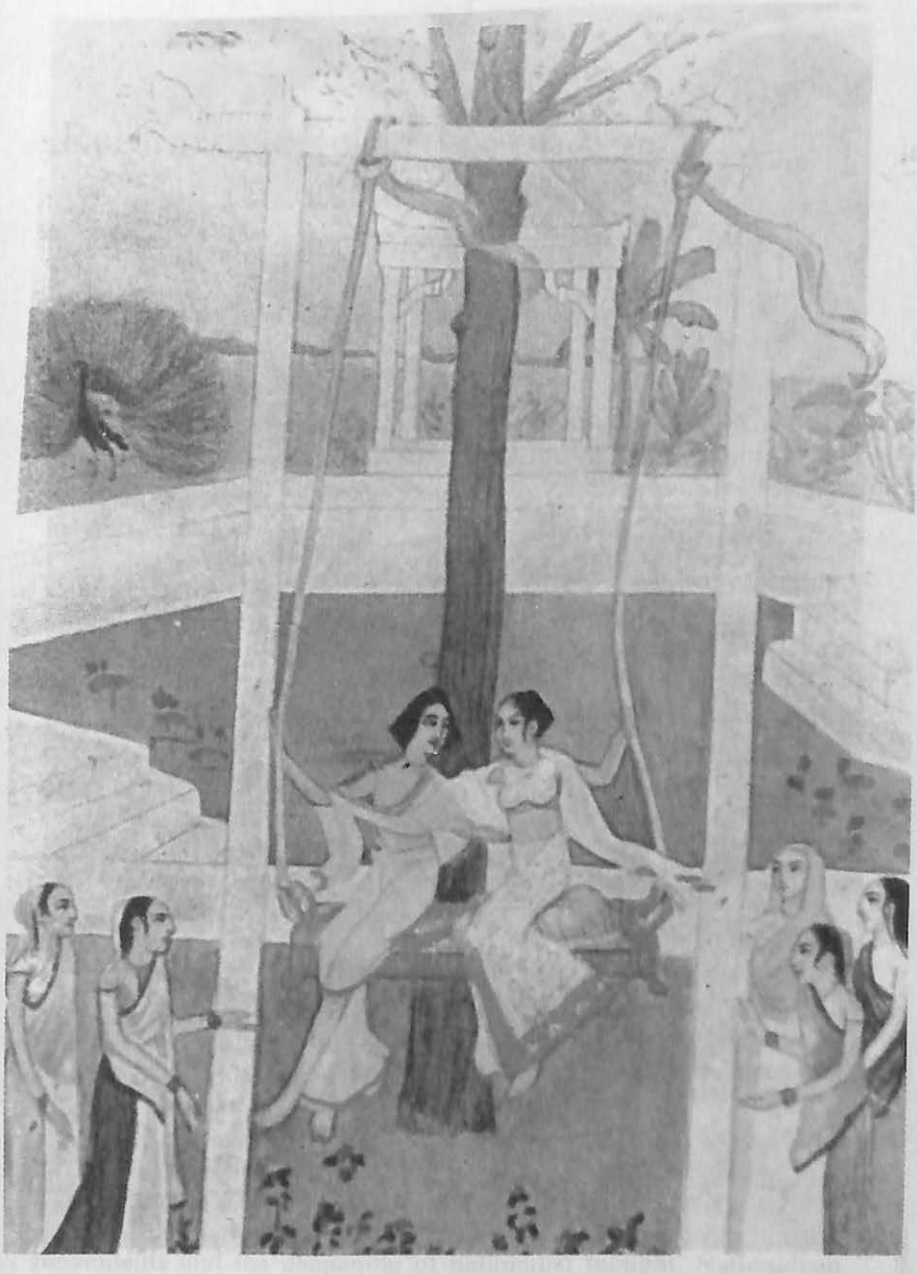
ILLUSTRATIONS

Plate no. 1	Kacha and Devayani
Plate no. 2	Death of Shah Jahan (1902)
Plate no. 3 – 4	*Kṛiṣhṇa Līlā* Series

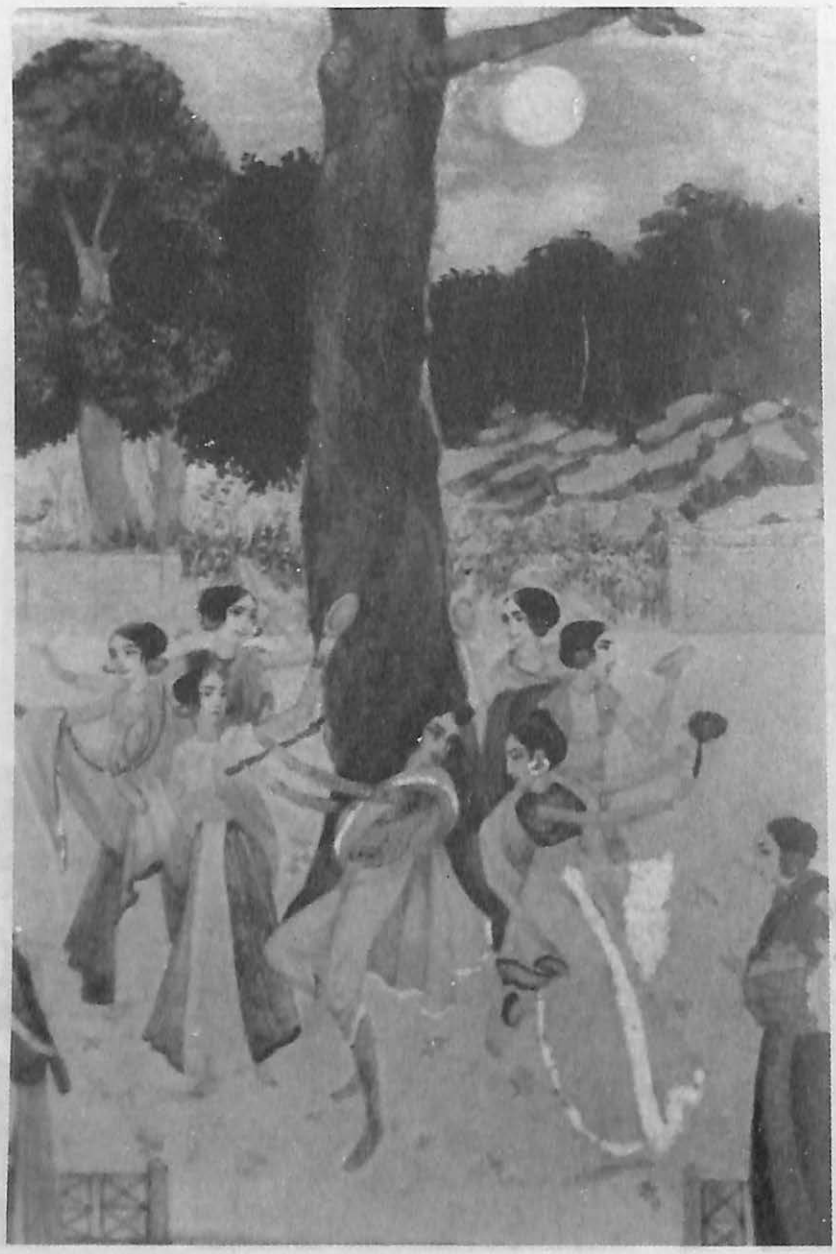
Kacha and Devayani



Death of Shah Jahan (1902)



Kṛiṣhṇa Līlā



Kṛiṣhṇa Līlā