SPECIAL ESSAY

BACK TO THE LAND OF THE PAST...*

Sumanta Banerjee

When I woke up, I saw the train entering the station. The name of the station was written on a yellow signboard. I knew now that I would have to get down. The pillars on the platform were red in colour, the doors of the office were painted green. When it stopped, I alighted. I saw Baba, Ma and Boudi (my sister-in-law) waiting at the furthest corner of the platform. There was nobody else anywhere, I was the only passenger to disembark at this station.

Ma rushed forward. "I hope you had no trouble," she said, welcoming me affectionately. "No, only the last few days were a little strenuous," I replied. Boudi smiled and said, "Come – let's head home."

When we crossed the gate of the platform and came and stood outside, I looked all around to see that many people had come. Robi-da (Robi Sen) was standing at a distance. Behind him was Dhritin Chakraborty; rubbing shoulders with him were my colleagues from the *Statesman* – Murali-da (Muralijiban Ghosh), Prashanta Sarkar, Ashim Ray, Shyamadas Basu. Where was Bhabani Choudhury? I didn't spot him in the crowd ! Even further away, I saw, through something of a blur, my Delhi friends- Rajinder Paul, Dilip Chaudhury, Subba Rao, Sudesh Vaid. On seeing me, they greeted me with a wave of their hands.

Robi-da was the only one to come forward. "Come over

*translated from Bengali by Nivedita Sen

to Samarbabu's in the evening'" he said. "You'll meet everybody."

"But where is Samar Sen ?," I asked, surprised.

"At the same place," Robi-da replied. "In the Swinhoe Street house."

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I got out of the station with Baba, Ma and Boudi. I observed. that it was the same old Kolkata. We got onto a tram. Baba lit a pipe, Boudi took out some change from the bag on her shoulder, and bought the tickets, and Ma turned all her attention to me - as always – pestering me with a hundred queries! We reached our old house- 37, Ekdalia Road.

"Have a bath quickly", Ma said. "There won't be any water."

"That same water problem even now!" I exclaimed. "Why don't you leave this house?"

"Tell me how we could possibly do that!" Ma said. "This is the house where your father..." She left the sentence unfinished.

In the afternoon, all of us sat down to eat. I ate *jhinge posto* (vegetable cooked in poppy seed paste) after ages; made by Ma, it was just as before! I could taste Boudi's culinary skills clearly in the *doi machh* - carp cooked in yoghurt. We talked a lot as we ate; even after the meal was over, sitting with our curry-stained fingers, there was no end to chatting. Baba was quiet like earlier times. Ma had unending questions - how was Dada, what were the granddaughter and grandson-in-law (Runki-Anil) upto? How old had their children (Piyal-Piyali) become? Hidden behind the questions was an unarticulated wish - when would they come? When would they all meet again?

I looked at Baba's face. Except for Runki when she was twelve-years old, he knew none of these people. He had departed long ago. What was he thinking, sitting and hearing about these unfamiliar people from unknown future

generations? I observed that that there was a wan smile on that old, tranquil face. After the meal, Boudi dragged me a little aside and asked me about my elder brother, "How is he? Does he take his medicines and pills regularly?"

I allayed Boudi's concerns by offering a catalogue of my Dada's daily regimen in the world of the living.

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I indulged myself in a long siesta in the afternoon. After the stress of the last few days, this was needed very badly. When I woke up, I found the day rolling into late evening. I went and stood on the balcony overlooking the main road. I noticed that the park next to the tram line was just the same. It used to be called the *Temporary Park* - I don't know why. Yet it had survived like that for so many years. A few gas lights had just been lit up. I saw that Baba had started off for his walk in the park. With him was his childhood friend and university colleague Kumudbandhu Ray, whom we used to address as Jethamoshai. He had a beautiful singing voice. After a while, their contemporary Suren Das, who had been my teacher at Jagabandhu School, joined them. He walked at an impossibly fast pace with his body leaning forward. We used to call him 'the Sir of the 110 degrees angle.' I remembered his son Debabrata, whose nickname was Bagha. In February 1946, on Rashid Ali Day, in the widespread demonstration in Kolkata protesting against the trial of the I.N.A. Captain Rashid Ali in Delhi's Red Fort, Bagha was killed by a police bullet. When he was hospitalized with the injury, his parents had gone to meet him. Amidst intolerable pain, he had said smilingly, "Why fear? I am giving up my life for the country!" He couldn't have been very old - he was a year or two senior to us. Fourteen-fifteen? He was always a sort of daredevil. And the times were such! In the words of the teenager prodigy, the contemporary young poet Sukanta Bhattacharya, "The drum-beats herald the victory of the last battle for freedom – no more fear anywhere." No wonder

that boys like Bagha would be in the front line of that battle.

Putting on a *kurta* over my *pyjamas*, I then got ready to go out. I would have to go to Samarbabu's. Samar Sen. The avant garde poet of the 1930-40 period, who stopped writing poems, gave up a comfortable job in the *Anandbazar Patrika* establishment, and opted instead to start the radical journal *Frontier* to give voice to dissenting views during the tumultuous days of the Naxalite movement. His home used to be the haunt of young admirers of his – I being one of them.

Ma sensed that I would spend the evening at the *adda* of old friends. "You're going there to drink that horrid stuff again?" Ma rebuked me. "Why don't you drink it sitting at home?" She then affectionately added, "Don't be late."

As soon as I stepped out from the house, I slipped into those familiar streets. After crossing the tram line, I took Cornfield Road and then turned into Swinhoe Street. There was a light burning downstairs in Samar Sen's house. As I knocked on the door, Samarbabu came out, sporting a *kurta* and a *lungi*. He wore glasses, and had that gentle smile on his face. On entering the drawing room, I saw Robi-da, Pradyot-da, Dhruba-da (Mitra), Kiran Raha and a few others. A bottle of whiskey had been opened. As soon as I entered, Robi-da yelled, "Here comes the bastard ! Where else can he go? He'd have to come back here !"

"When did you arrive?", Samarbabu asked.

Robi-da answered on my behalf. "This morning. I went to the station. In fact, I told him then to come along in the evening."

"Who else has come today?"' Dhruba-da enquired.

"I didn't see anybody else getting down at the station"' I replied. "I was the only one."

After this, the discussion veered in another direction. The gathering did not air views on politics. They became immersed instead in conjectures about all the people known to them who had stayed back in Kolkata to date, the ailments that they were suffering from, and forecasts of how long

they were destined to live. Well, I found it funny! Earlier, in this very house on Swinhoe Street, every evening the air was filled with sounds of political debates and speculations. And then, before the *adda* broke up, sometimes there would be some reminiscing on friends who were dead. Now I observed that the discussion was about the future; the objects of this discussion were those who were still alive. And the predictions were about the number of days that they would have to count to wait for their death.

I saw that in one corner of the room, just as in earlier times, Kiranbabu was sitting silently and listening to everyone else talk. Kiran Raha was a well-known film critic in his days; but his weak spot was Satyajit Ray. We, the youngsters, used to make fun of his partiality for Ray. But Kiranbabu – older than me by several years – never took offence, and was always affectionate towards me.

I dragged a wicker stool to sit near him. He didn't say a word. I understood that he had been a little hurt by my behaviour. "Kiranbabu, I couldn't manage to go to your house before you left." I said softly.

"Oh no! So what? You are a very busy person," he replied. He then paused a little and said, "You were in Kolkata when I was ill, isn't it?"

"Yes, for a while," I said embarrassedly. "But amidst so much work..."

Kiranbabu pressed my hand and said, "I know. Actually, I had lost my hearing towards the end and was unable to recognize anybody. All my old friends had therefore stopped coming. It was sensible of you not to come."

On the other side, the *adda* had warmed up. Robi-da was abusing with gusto those who were still alive and kicking. Nobody- no minister/ deputy minister/ Congress/ Communist/ political leader/ film star/ cricket player- was being spared the sting of his scathing tongue.

Taking this opportunity, I turned to Dhruba Mitra and remarked sardonically, "Do you remember, Dhruba-da,

Mrinal Sen used to say, 'Robi Sen is the Durbasha of this era. Nobody dare stand face to face with him.'"

Robi-da was going to say something, but Dhruba-da shut him up, sidled up to me and asked me in a suppressed voice, "Is Suchitra still singing?"

"I saw her at a gathering at Rabindra Bhaban the other day," I replied. "But the singing was done by her students."

"I wonder how she is," Dhruba-da seemed to say to himself.

It seemed like a veiled entreaty: "When will she return?"

In the midst all this, I noticed that Samarbabu was just as he was before - calm and steady. He was listening quietly, expressing a few opinions from time to time, at times exceedingly sarcastic – even at his own expense. In the very middle of all this, he turned to me once and enquired about how my wife Bizeth was. His question reached straight into Robi-da's ever attentive auditory cavity. Immediately, Robi-da pointed a finger at me and asked, "His wife Bizeth...? Talking about her? That young woman even cast a spell on *Frontier*. It was a Bhanumati's feat!"

Somebody who possibly kept track of my wife's birthplace said in a stuttering voice, "Why Robi ? Do-n't-yo-u-kno-w? Bhanumati was, in fact, born in Hyderabad!"

I realized that under the trance of alcohol, a historian among the group of scholars present here was confusing Bikramaditya's wife, Bhanumati the expert magician, with another Bhanumati who in a much later period acquired fame in Hyderabad as a danseuse and the mistress of a nawab of the Asafzahi dynasty there. But then, this Bhanumati also, one has to admit, was a specialist in another form of magic!

However, in a bid to manage the situation, and in order to calm down Robi-da, I protested: "Ah! Why are you drawing Bizeth into matters regarding *Frontier*? She was always non-political! She had never bothered her head about these things."

"Indeed!" Robi-da now gave me a dirty look and exclaimed. Looking at the others, he then said with a

dramatic gesture, "Then let me tell you... In 1971, when the Pakistani soldiers had entered Dhaka... at that time..."

I then remembered. I quickly interrupted Robi-da and said, "Aha! That was just an act of Bizeth's impulsiveness..."

But who could hinder Robi-da? Meanwhile, he had whetted the curiosity of the others. Shutting me up, everybody leaned forward to listen to Robi-da's account. "What happened, Robi? Why don't you spill the beans?"

I noticed Samar Babu's lips curving into a mischievous smile. Robi-da then settled down to narrate the story with a flourish: "In 1971, when the news of the atrocities committed by the Pakistani soldiers had started pouring in, and in Delhi, intellectuals like this bastard Sumanta were organizing meetings and demonstrations of protest, his wife Bizeth suddenly sent a poem to *Frontier*."

"A poem in *Frontier*? But *Frontier* never published poems!" somebody in the room butted in sarcastically.

Robi-da made a face and said, "But that is what I am talking about! This was the first time that a poem was published in *Frontier*."

"Was it a very fiery poem?" someone asked.

"Rubbish! Of all the...," Robi-da snapped back. Then he pointed his finger at me and shouted: "This scoundrel! It was to expose the hypocrisy of scoundrels like him that Bizeth wrote that poem." Taking a swig of whiskey from his glass, and twisting his face into a grimace, Robi-da continued: "Bizeth wrote about how they gave fiery speeches in meetings and demonstrations during the day, and in the evenings, how after boozing at home or at the Press Club, they shed tears for East Bengal."

Falteringly, I said, "Bizeth actually wrote it and sent it to Samarbabu in a fit of anger. She never imagined that it would get published..." I turned towards Samarbabu and said, "Do you know? She still feels embarrassed about the affair!"

Samarbabu smiled gently and said, "Why? It was nice of her..."

The night was dragging on. Suddenly, Sulekha-di came out from the inner rooms. I could make out that this was Samarbabu's dinner time. We all got up one by one. Sulekha-di took me a little aside and said, "Bithi has heard that you are here. She wants to meet you."

"Where is Bithi?" I asked. "At Apu's place," she replied in a very soft voice.

I recalled that their daughter Bithi's husband Dhurjati - our friend Apu - had come back here many years ago.

"Does Apu still have his old phone number?", I asked.

Sulekhadi smiled and said, "Everything is the same here-nothing changes." "I will call tomorrow", I said.

All of us got out of Samarbabu's house, one by one. I saw Robi-da off at the doorstep of his Bamunpara Lane house. "How is Bizeth?," he held my hand and asked.

"She's fine!" I replied. With a very soft touch to his voice, Robi-da bid me goodbye: "You're lucky, Sumanta!"

I started walking towards my old house in Ekdalia Road. It was eleven at night. Thinking about Robi-da, I recalled many things. He was a single-minded worker of the old Communist party. I have heard so many stories about the 'underground period' of 1948-49 from him. Most of them were amusing, because he had a special ability of debunking everything, no matter how serious it was. But camouflaged under this man's iconoclastic behaviour, we all knew that there was the history of an emotional relationship.

I kept walking and turned up at those old roads - Bondel Road, Ballygunge Place, Mandeville Gardens. I tried to remember - Kalindi Sen lived somewhere in this vicinity. What a great actress! She had been my Boudi's colleague at IPTA- through that link, she was close to our family. Those who had seen Kalindi act in Amritalal Basu's *Byapika Biday* produced by Sabitabrata Dutta, would never be able to forget her. Where was Kalindi Sen now?

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The phone rang out loud at the dead of night. Startled, I got up from my sleep. The sonorous voice that came floating in as I picked it up sounded familiar. "Sumanta, is anything brewing?" It was the voice of Kedar Ghosh, our chief reporter in the *Statesman*. He was our big boss. When I was on night duty, he used to call me up regularly like this in the middle of the night to find out if some mishap had taken place in the city at some unearthly hour, and to give me instructions if needed. I got alarmed, hearing his voice all of a sudden. Had I gone off to sleep while on duty in the reporters' room of the *Statesman*? I looked all around me, but no! I was in my room in our Ekdalia Road house. "Kedarbabu? You?", I then asked hesitantly over the phone.

The reply came from the other side. In that ever-familiar, dry, solemn voice devoid of any feeling, he said: "Come and see me tomorrow."

"But where, Kedarbabu?" I asked hastily, before he could hang up.

There seemed to be a note of impatience in his voice as he replied, as if I had raised a meaningless, irrelevant issue. "Why? In the office!" he said.

I couldn't sleep for the rest of the night. I started wondering whether this meant that the *Statesman* got published here too. In other words - I would have to go to that old office tomorrow morning ! Who all would I see there?

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The next morning. I reached that old crossing at Dharmatolla. The *Statesman* office seemed the same as in former times, but looked a little out of place from the outside. The shops, crowds, cars and other vehicles were missing. It seemed to be just an unfinished sort of house in the midst of undeveloped surroundings. As if it were waiting for everybody to arrive.

I entered the premises. It was already eleven. But there was not much of a crowd in front of the advertisement

counter downstairs. Everything was sort of hazy. Standing before the lift, when I pressed the bell, it did not descend. Perforce, I climbed the stairs to the first floor. The corridors were empty - there was nobody around. But as soon as I drew near our old reporters' room, I felt reassured. Ah! Here was our peon Tewari sitting on the bench that was placed outside this room. He had on his usual half-sleeved *kurta* and khaki shorts. He stood up, and greeted me with a beaming smile: "So you've come back?" It seemed as though he had, in fact, been waiting for me. I asked him how he was.

I remembered that it was Tewari's job to take the typed copies of the reports prepared by us to the room of the sub-editors, which was just opposite our room. Those were days when computers and e-mails had not yet become the standard things. Tewari used to doze off late in the night. While we were on night duty, therefore, many of our copies would often not reach the sub-editors' room. They would get scattered around midway on the floor of the corridor. Quite often, when we got out after finishing our night duty, we would see Tewari sitting on the bench, leaning against the wall and sleeping while one of the copies typed by us was lying under the bench. We would pick it up and hand it in at the subeditors' room. But we never complained against Tewari. The reason was not entirely a love of the subaltern (although the theory about subalterns had not been fashioned at that time, those of us who were leftists supported workers like Tewari). Let me divulge the real reason. Towards the end of the month, young reporters like us used to run out of the money that we earned from our wages. We then had to appeal to Tewari. He used to give us loans on interest!

On entering our reporters' room, I saw 'Lord Morley' - our senior colleague Murali-da or Muralijiban Ghosh - sitting at his table back in the room facing the door. (We had fondly christened him with the name of the British administrator

John Morley of the famous Morley-Minto reforms in India, partly because of the similarity in the sound of the two names, and partly because of Murali-da's strict adherence to English speech pattern). He was rubbing his forehead, as if in excruciating pain, poring over some junior reporter's copy to correct it before sending it to the press! Before I could say anything, I heard a scream from behind - "So you've come at last?" I turned back and saw Shyamadas Basu , our staff photographer, getting up from his table to greet me. He caught hold of me and dragged me to the other table – the more important one – where our boss Kedar Ghosh was sitting with his pipe in his mouth, talking to somebody on the phone. Shyamadas was least bothered about his phone conversation and shouted: "Here, Kedarbabu, he has finally turned up."

Kedarbabu hung up and said, "Yes. I had a chat with him over the phone yesterday." Then he turned towards me and said, "Look at the roster to find out your assignment today."

I turned around, and found that the long, wide table of the reporters was still in the same place. In the middle of the rows of mammoth Remington typewriters, I could see the old roster register with the red cover lying there as in the past. Before I could pick it up and open it, Murali-da piped up, "Ah! What will you get by looking at the roster? You don't even have an assignment! Unless Satya-da comes, who'll give you an assignment? He'll be here a little later."

It occurred to me that in fact, I couldn't see Satya-da, meaning Satya Bose, our deputy chief reporter, anywhere. It was Satya-da who would regularly note in the roster who among us would go news-gathering where - Writers' Building (the red-brick colonial structure housing the secretariat in Dalhousie Square), the Municipality offices in Dharmatalla, or the police headquarters at Lalbazaar, or meetings, demonstrations etc. in the Maidan or elsewhere. He was a quiet person - a man of the old British era. With a lot of

care, he would scribble through our copies with a pencil to make them printworthy. I owe a lot to him during my training in journalism. Whether it was winter or summer, Satya-da would come wearing a tie and a suit. He would address us affectionately as 'Bhai,' and cajole us to extract copies from all of us by the stipulated deadline.

I was waiting for Satyada, when Ashim Ray suddenly appeared, pushing open the door. He had that familiar cropful of hair, and a playful smile under the moustache on his face – as I used to know him when he enjoyed fame as an offbeat novelist among a limited circle of readers like us. He was sporting a coloured bush shirt and trousers. Seeing me, he came forward and said, "How are you? One did not get a chance to talk to you amidst that crowd at the station yesterday."

"How are you?" I asked.

"Getting by alright," he replied. "Now that you are staying here, come over to our place one day. Do you remember the house?"

"Wouldn't I?" I replied. "The first floor of that old, red house at the corner of Rashbehari and Kalighat. I had first gone there soon after joining the *Statesman*. It must have been 1962. You had invited me to have tea one Sunday morning. I was an admirer of your novel *Gopal Deb*. I was really floored when you requested me to review *Ekaler Katha, Gopal Deb* and *Dwitiyo Janma* for the magazine *Ekshan*."

Ashim now looked at me with a suggestive smile and said, "And don't you remember the last visit?" I recollected. "Of course I do," I answered. "It must have been 1973-74. Bhabanibabu and I..."

Ashim interrupted me and said, "Both of you came over suddenly one Sunday afternoon. At that time, you were both..." Ashim left the sentence unfinished.

I caught the thread and said, "Yes. Both of us were then underground. And do you recall - your wife Geeta had cooked and fed us a fabulous dish of hilsha with mustard! Its taste still lingers in my mouth."

Ashim smiled gently and said, "Geeta reached here even before me. She has now settled down. I will ask her to cook *Shorshe-Ilish* (Hilsha in mustard paste) one day and invite you all."

I remembered that I had last met Ashim at the corner of Gariahat in 1985. We had both gone and entered a small tea stall. Ashim had broken down while giving me a description of the incident. He and Geeta had gone to some far-flung region to spend a vacation. Geeta had suddenly taken ill. There were no doctors anywhere around. Ashim had run around desperately here and there - but Geeta finally died, virtually without any treatment. While narrating to me his helplessness during his wife's last moments, Ashim had broken down despondently inside that tea shop. After some days, Ashim had himself taken ill. One day, I heard that Ashim was in hospital. He died soon after.

Meanwhile, I found our reporters' room was getting crowded. Phani-da (Chakrabarty), a senior colleague of mine, had just arrived. He welcomed me loudly with a wide smile, "So! You've arrived at last, Sumantababu?" Then he drew me aside and spoke in a low voice. "There is a lot to talk about. Bhabani has sent a message. Will you be there in the evening? I'll tell you when we meet." Immediately after that, he excitedly walked over towards Kedarbabu's table and began to report, "Do you know Kedarbabu, what a to-do there was at Writers' Building yesterday..." After a while, Prashanta Sarkar sauntered in. Tall, and clad in a white shirt tucked into a pair of black trousers, he peered at me from behind his thick glasses. He held out a packet of *Charminar* towards me and asked, "So *mawai*! How do you feel – being here?" He always pronounced *mashay* (sir') as *mawai.*

I smiled and said, "I still haven't got used to it." Prashanta laughed out loud and said, "You will, by this evening." Then he opened the roster and passed his eyes over his assignments, puffed out some smoke from the cigarette dangling from a corner of his lips, and said, "Okay listen,

Mawai! Come to Olympia at nine in the night. That rascal Dhritin will also be there." He pulled a typewriter and started typing some news report or feature story. Then he turned to me and said, "Why don't you drop in at Raghu Banerjee's office around afternoon?"

Watching him typing, I was reminded of days long past, and about his remarkable professional skill. Prashanta Sarkar – known by his pet name Balai-da! According to Raghu Banerjee, he was a crack reporter. He used to be a stringer for different newspapers. He could report the same incident in diverse ways, preparing it within a very short time for several newspapers. He was on the staff of the *Statesman*. And yet he could feed in the same news from various angles, interpreting according to the different needs and exigencies of papers like the US *Life/Time* chain, Bombay's *Blitz*, the Kolkata weekly *Darpan* – for all of which he wrote. If we asked him how he could juggle these various roles, he used to say, "*Arrey Mawai*, I was initiated into this racket by the Communist party. I was a member of the party during the 1948-49-50 period. In those days, the party line would change every now and then. One had to walk in step, and change positions. I have thus learnt how to change the colours and feed the same news story to different papers."

Sensing what was going on in my mind, Prashanta stopped typing, lit another cigarette, turned to me and said, "Raghu has promised to take us somewhere today. It is a *hijra* settlement in the Khidirpore dockyard. Will you come long? I can sell the story to *Time*."

By Raghu, he meant Raghu Banerjee, the Divisional Commissioner of Kolkata, a powerful officer. He sat in the New Secretariat from morning till night. Then he went home and slept. At midnight, he would get out in his car. If we (that is Prashanta, Dipankar Ghosh, Shyamadas and I) were on night duty, he would turn up at the *Statesman* office, and when our work for the day was over, his work would begin. That is to say, he would do the rounds of the entire city,

taking us along with him. He had the lanes and by-lanes of Kolkata on his fingertips. He would go crazy wanting to show us which old house had a blend of Moghul architecture, gothic architecture and Bengali atchala (a traditional thatched cottage with eight roofs). Or he might have come upon a prostitute on some night at the corner of Free School Street who he would be eager to introduce to us because nobody could sing like her Rabindranath's *Dui haat-e kaaler mandira je shodai baaje* (The cymbals of Time for ever being played by the pair of hands).

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While being engrossed in all these memories, I suddenly looked up and found that the fingers on our office wall clock were about to reach half-past twelve. All except I were very busy around this time. Everybody was getting out on their respective assignments. About an hour or so later, Ashim Ray would have to go to cover some public meeting. Shyamadas would accompany him to take pictures. Shyama has always been the trouble-shooter in our office. Although no one dared to question Kedar Ghosh, who lorded over us, he would give in to all of Shyamadas's demands - however unreasonable they were. I don't know why. Even now, lifting the camera bag onto his shoulder, Shyamadas went up to Kedarbabu's table and announced, "Kedarbabu, Satyada hasn't come in till now. So let us now take Sumanta along with us on our assignment."

Looking at his watch, Kedarbabu lowered his face and mumbled a 'hmm' of sorts, indicating his assent!

Ashim, Shyama and I were walking through the corridor after getting out of the reporters' room, when we saw SB - or Satya Brata Chatterjee coming out of the news editor's room on the left. He was better-known as an art critic among the painters' circles of Calcutta than as the news editor of the *Statesman*. Seeing me, he struck his forehead and exclaimed: "Oh no! You again?"

I laughed and said, "No. I will not bother you any more. I have given up painting. And I don't do reporting any more."

"You've done a sensible thing," SB said. "You never managed to do much with either of these." Then he pondered a little and added, "However, I thought a few of your pictures weren't bad - I had written so in the *Statesman* then. When was it that your exhibition took place?"

I scratched my head and tried to recall the year. Was it 1962 or 1963 when, along with the paintings of my friend Moni Jana (now living in some obscure village in France perhaps!), I had exhibited my paintings in the Academy of Fine Arts? In those days, renting a hall for exhibiting paintings was affordable. There were only a few galleries which one could easily go and book for exhibitions - for instance, the one behind the museum in Sudder Street, the Artistry House adjacent to the office of the Asiatic Society in Park Street, Chowringhee Terrace in Bhowanipore. And another that was most popular and easily available was the Academy of Fine Arts patronized by Lady Ranu Mukherjee – the wife of Sir Biren Mukherjee, an industrialist knighted by the British Queen! – who also happened to head the board of directors of our newspaper *Statesman.*

I asked SB, "Does the Academy of Fine Arts still exist here?

"Why wouldn't it?" SB replied. "Lady Ranu is present here in person." Of course! I remembered that Lady Ranu was a patron of art! Our Debu-da (artist Debabrata Mukhopadhyay) who was my maternal cousin, used to banter and say, "Lady Ranu is no ordinary person! Our Lady Ranu's place is second only to that of Lady Gregory's of Ireland!"

Walking down the corridor in a hurry with a bundle of papers in his hand in the opposite direction, SB turned towards me and said, "I hope you are coming to the mosque in the evening! We could talk then."

'Mosque' meant the place for reading the evening

namaaz for mullahs like us! In other words, it was our favourite haunt – the Olympia Bar!

Ashim, Shyama and I started walking. At the end of the corridor, when we were at the head of the stairs, I suddenly remembered something. I turned to the right and looked at the two lavatories adjacent to each other. Lo and behold The nameplate was still intact.

"What's up? Why have you stopped?" asked Shyama.

Looking up at Ashim, I drew his attention to the board on the women's lavatory and asked, "Do you see - it still says 'Ladies'?"

Getting restless, Shyama asked, "So what?" He was going to utter an abuse when I interrupted him and said, "Aha ! Ashim, don't you recall? In keeping with our *Statesman* stylebook, there was a strict injunction against ever using the word 'ladies' in the *Statesman* newspaper - one must only write 'woman.'"

Remembering it, Ashim gave a mischievous grin and said, "Yes. There would only be exceptions under two circumstances. First, one would have to write 'Lady' if one had to report something about Lady Ranu Mukherjee, because she was the wife of the chairman of our board, Sir Biren. And the second condition..."

Before he could finish, Shyama laughed out loud and declared, "Oh yes! I remember."

In those days, there was actually a joke doing the rounds in our office - 'As soon as a woman sits on a commode in the *Statesman* office, she becomes a lady!'

The three of us got out of the *Statesman* office and came onto the road. "Come, let's do some groundwork before getting off", said Shyama.

The term 'groundwork' had been coined by Muralida. It meant - after coming out from our office, and before going out on our respective assignments, we should tarry for an hour or so at *Chhota Bristol* - the *Little Bristol* bar in the lane opposite the *Statesman* office – and down a few pegs, to

prepare the 'groundwork' for our reporting during the rest of the day !

Following Shyama's advice, we entered *Little Bristol.* The ancient English Bristol Hotel that used to be on the main road had become extinct for a long while now. Its small, cheap, *desi* version was in the lane that faced our office. It was called alternatively *Chhota Bristol* or *Moti Sheel* (named in the memory of the famous millionaire of old Kolkata, whose descendants still carried on the business there). As soon as we handed the price for three pegs of rum to the waiter, a bottle of water and three glasses of rum arrived. Pouring water into all the glasses, I said, "Look here, Shyama, you rascal! You died panting from asthmatic spasm. You always suffered from asthma. But here I find that you have no dearth of breath. You're carrying on as ever even after coming here!"

Shyama took a sip from his glass and said, "Why shouldn't I go on? I don't care a fig for anyone. I dare anyone to tear a single strand of my pubic hair!"

I patted Shyama on his back and said, "Bravo Shyama! This is why you are *our* Shyama. This is why Dipankar had named you 'raw.'"

Dipankar – Dipankar Ghosh – was our colleague in the *Statesman.* He's been left behind in the world of the living. Rolypoly and jovial as ever, he still sings in his bass voice the old song that he learnt in Oxford as a student – "Ippy ai, ai, ippy ai... she came in blue pyjamas...she'll be coming around the mountains..."

Shyama laughed, raised his hand and said, "No, no! 'raw' was not for my smutty jokes but..."

Ashim reminded us, "Dipankar used to say, 'Shyama is a raw diamond, an uncut, unspoilt one'!" It was true that a genuine human being like Shyama was rare. I asked him, "Tell me, do you still have that studio in that lane behind Dharmatolla?"

Shyama struck his hand on the table and said, "Of course.

I still use the dark room there. Come along one day. We could have an *adda.*"

I suddenly recalled an incident one evening at that studio of his. "Remember?" I asked, looking at Ashim. "We were chatting while in an *adda* at his studio one day. Dhritin Chakraborty was also there. We were probably discussing poetry. Suddenly Shyamadas, who had his stomach lined with quite a few pegs by then, stood up and said, Damn your habit of writing poems on the sky, the stars and the moon! If you want to hear, listen to my poem.' He then recited in a serious voice: 'I could fuck your moonlight, as long as I have a lantern in my hand!'"

Ashim and Shyama both burst out laughing. Shyama patted me on my back and said, "Wow Sumanta! Your memory is great!"

The day was getting on. It was time for Ashim and Shyamadas to go and cover the meeting. We guzzled the booze in one gulp and got up. After getting out on the road, Ashim asked me, "Why don't you come along with us? It's not as if you have any other work."

"What is this meeting all about ?", I asked.

"What else?", Shyama replied. "The CP(I)M."

"But all their leaders are still..." I said.

"Why?", said Ashim. "Kakababu and Promodebabu are here. And Anil Biswas has just arrived." He then grinned in his characteristic cynical manner and said, "The gathering at the Maidan is, in fact, to greet him with a warm welcome." His comment stirred up old memories ...Kakababu (or uncle) was the endearing term we used, during our days in the united Communist Party of India (CPI), for Muzaffar Ahmad, one of the founders of the Communist movement in India, who later led the CPI(M); Promodebabu was Promode Das Gupta, the veteran secretary of the party's West Bengal unit, whom I had encountered both as a former functionary of the CPI, and later as a journalist; and lastly, his successor Anil Biswas who was the West Bengal CPI(M)'s

secretary, recently dead – all of whom have found shelter in this world !

Now, turning back at Ashim and Shyamadas, I said, "No, let it be," "You better carry on – after all, you have to write the report."

Before leaving, I pulled Ashim a little away and asked, "Look here, I don't see Bhabani Choudhury. Doesn't he come to office?"

He remained quiet for a while. Then he said, "After coming here, Bhabani didn't join the *Statesman* again. You know him. Would he ever be the slave of the management of the paper again after waging war against them?"

I remembered the first strike in the *Statesman* office to meet the demands of the press staff and other workers in 1966. At that time, among the reporters, it was Bhabani alone who joined the strike in their support. He is a pioneer. During the all-India newspaper strike in 1969, the other reporters of the *Statesman* joined him in participating in the strike. After a year or two, he went a step ahead. Resigning from the *Statesman*, he went underground and joined revolutionary politics.

"But can't one meet him? Is he underground here too?" I asked Ashim.

"Only if he makes himself available can you meet him," he said with a smile.

***

After seeing off Shyama and Ashim, I crossed the road and reached the Central Avenue intersection. It was two in the afternoon. I entered the House of Lords of Coffee House. It used be very crowded at this time in the past. But I saw that it was virtually empty now. A few people were sitting at a couple of tables. I saw Robi-da puffing away at a cigarette at a far flung table. In front of him was Debesh-da, or Debesh Bhattacharya, an officer in an insurance company. He would spend the major portion of the day in Coffee House. He

would pore over a pile of newspapers, mark out a particular news item and ask, "Tell me, will Johnson sit with Ho-Chi-Minh?" Or "What do you think? Do you think Prafulla Sen (the then chief minister of West Bengal) will survive this election?" I advanced towards their table with trepidation. I thought Debesh-da would start firing questions again. But I immediately felt assured that those were all questions of a previous era. Debesh-da certainly wouldn't bother his head with those any more. Instead, he would start with "Tell me - what do you think? Would America eventually be routed in Iraq?" Or "Tell me - who is really this Osama Bin Laden?" But it is these questions again which had flummoxed me while in the other world, and having failed to find answers there I had finally landed up in this world!

As soon as I stood near the table, Debesh-da raised his head, and seeing me, said, "Ah! You've come. We were waiting for you." Saying this, he spread out a heap of newspapers. I could spot among them the pieces of news items circled in the familiar black ink by him. But these were no political news. Debeshda broke into a roar of laughter and said, "Look, they've carried your obituary!"

I pulled up a chair to sit and grabbed the newspapers. It was true! Strange! There were obituaries on me. In some papers, there was just a quarter of a column but in some others it was spread over a full column, accompanied by a hideous, passport size photograph. What was written was even more horrendous. Wrong facts and foolish observations! The more I read, the more furious I became.

"Look at this, Robi-da? The gumption of the fellows!" I said complainingly: "All of you know me. Tell me, is there any sense in what they have written? I have to register my protest!"

Robi-da turned the newspapers over with a serious face and said, "But they have missed out on the main thing."

"What is that?" I asked.

Robi-da took a puff at his cigarette and said, "Not one,

but two things. Firstly, that you, son-of-a-bitch, were a number-one womanizer - they haven't written that. And secondly, they also haven't said that you were a fake revolutionary."

We all started laughing. But something made me feel ill at ease. There were many wrong dates in the obituaries. Those who had written them had jumbled up many incidents. In our times, there used to be a department called 'the morgue' in the *Statesman*, which prepared files compiling facts about the lives of certain famous people and would regularly update them - so that the obituaries published on the day after their death would be more or less correct. In my lifetime, I could not gain a place in those exclusive files, and thus failed to enter the morgue'! As a result, I have to suffer this sorry state today! But then what was the need for these obits on me? May be some of my acquaintances, out of friendly affection, had inserted them in the newspapers.

"But there are many wrong statements here, Debesh-da," I protested again. "It is necessary to submit a rejoinder to them."

"This is the fun, you idiot!" Debesh-da laughed aloud, and said. "You people have no privileges like rejoinders, contradictions, letters to editors, in this world. In the other world, they will eternally remember you solely through what will be written in the newspapers about your lives. No matter how much you protest sitting here, you won't be able to achieve anything."

Thumping his chest, Debeshda said, "Look at me. I had spent my life being a pimp for insurance companies. I hadn't become famous like you. No obituary came out in the newspapers after my death. Only you people have remembered me – as I once used to be!"

"Its true," Robi-da said. "Remember, Sumanta? With a cancer in his throat, and a grotesque bandage tied around his neck, Debesh took us to Elphinstone bar one day and treated us to booze?"

Jumping up, Debeshda said, "Lets go to Elphinstone."

Surprised, I asked, "Which age are you living in, Debeshda? Is Elphinstone there any more? In its place is Elphin!"

"Oh, you don't know - we have all the old things here," Robi-da said, laughing loudly. "Lets go."

After getting out of the House of Lords, we walked a bit- and what a surprise ! I found that it was indeed true! Our old Elphinstone was still there. As we were about to enter, somebody from the first floor of a house across the road waved at me and said, "Welcome Mr. Banerjee!" I recognized him - the Parsi gentleman who once ran Elphinstone.

I entered - and found that not much change had taken place. There were the the same light green coloured surroundings. The same waiters. Robi-da and Debesh-da ordered some rum. I was terribly hungry. I asked the waiter: "Do you still make the steamed Bombay Duck that you used to serve in the past ?" He gave me a happy smile and said, "Certainly, Sir."

***

Through with eating and drinking, when I returned home, the afternoon was rolling into evening. I went and lay flat on my bed. I woke up with a tickling on my feet. I opened my eyes to see Boudi standing with a cup of tea, smiling gently. "Do you know what time it is?" she asked. Getting up hurriedly, I saw from the window that it was late evening. I took the cup from Boudi's hand and started sipping at it. "What's the hurry?" Boudi asked.

"I have to go out", I said impatiently.

"We know you'll go out – but where?" Boudi enquired.

Looking at Boudi, I remembered something. "Somebody has invited me to Olympia", I said enigmatically.

"Do you really need an invitation to go to Olympia?" she asked.

"But the host is a special person", I replied.

Boudi's curiosity was gradually rising. "Who?" she asked.

I reminded her. "Do you remember S.B.Chatterjee? He has invited me."

She then smiled and said, "Yes, I remember. After the first show of *Pather Panchali*, he had come and congratulated me profusely." This was back in 1955, when the film was released with Boudi acting in the role of Sarbojaya.

"Let me then tell you a story", I said. "It's another example of his complimenting you."

Boudi sat down eagerly to listen to me. "I was then working in the *Statesman*", I said. "One evening, we were having an *adda* at the Olympia. It was getting late. I remembered suddenly that you had asked me to return home early - you needed to consult me about something. I was about to get up hurriedly when S.B. Chatterjee asked me, "Why are you getting up so soon?" "Boudi is waiting", I blurted out. All hell broke loose after that! Beating his forehead, SB said in mock indignation, "Goodness! It's bad news! There's now a Charulata in every home!" (SB was mischievously referring to the just released *Charulata* of Satyajit Ray's, where there's the hint of a romantic relationship between the heroine and her younger brother-in-law).

Boudi burst out laughing and said, "I didn't know the man was so witty!"

But soon after, she looked at me seriously and pleaded, "But I really need to consult you on something. We must find time and sit down one day."

***

It was December. There was a hint of winter in the evening breeze. I opened the wardrobe in my bedroom to find that Ma had caringly arranged and stacked my old woollens. The sports jacket that was very precious to me was hanging there. I had got it tailored in my initial working years, ages ago. Pulling it out and wearing it, I saw that it still fitted me more

or less. I found a pair of terywool trousers. It was irritating trying to get into them. They tapered towards the legs like Aligarhi churidars. I recalled that 'drainpipes' had been much in vogue those days, and I must have ordered those trousers according to those prevailing sartorial norms. What could I do? Finding nothing else, I put them on.

When I got out on the road, the lights had been switched on. My watch said it was only seven. It would be no use going to Olympia now. Nobody would have come at such an early hour. I, therefore, started walking slowly towards Gariahat. The old shops still stood there. There was no big crowd though. Through the main road, a few trams crawled by over a track surrounded by green grass. As I reached the corner of the Gariahat market, I met Bhagirath Maity. He was sitting in his accustomed place running his stall of newspapers and magazines. An activist of the Communist party, he used to sell the party paper *Swadhinata*. Seeing me, he said, "No! *Swadhinata* doesn't come out any more. But many other papers come here. Will you take one?" I evaded his request, exchanged a few standard words and proceeded towards Rashbehari Avenue.

I walked a little further and saw that the tea-shop called 'Paniyan' was still there on the right side of the road, and its doors were open. Inside, the chairs and tables were neatly laid down in rows on either side. I entered and found the actor Utpal Dutt sitting there alone, reading a book. He raised his head, and opening his eyes wide, said "Sit down" in his booming voice.

I looked all around me and said, "It looks the same." Then I drew up a chair, ordered tea, turned towards Utpal and said, "Remember? When the Soviet Union attacked Hungary, we were students of the Calcutta university. Those of us who were communists arranged a debate in Ashutosh Hall. We invited Amlan Dutta and other anti-Communists as speakers. We were determined to defeat them. Who could we get to speak against them? Finding no way out, we

turned up here to see if we could get hold of you. It was on an evening like this. We came and saw that you were sitting exactly at this table. Immediately, we grabbed you and took you along. And how brilliantly you spoke! You demolished the logic of all the others and absolutely checkmated them."

Utpal shook his finger, interrupted me and said, "You made a mistake even to begin with. Soviet Union did not attack Hungary, but went to rescue it from the hands of the counter-revolutionaries.

"Let that be'" I replied. "What is the need of going back to those old disputes?"

Utpal opened his eyes even wider, looked at me and said, "No, no! It is necessary. The counter-revolutionaries in Romania were the ones who assassinated Ceausescu. He fought for Communist ideals to his last breath."

I didn't argue any more. "Come to Minerva Theatre next Saturday," Utpal said. "You will see my new play *Nepaler Gagane Lal Tara (Red Star Over Nepal)*. Satya (Satya Bandyopadhyay – the well-known actor from Utpal's People's Little Theatre group) has just arrived here. He will act in the role of Comrade Prachanda."

Promising that I would definitely go, I came out. It was eight o'clock now.

***

I hopped onto a tram and got down at the corner of Park Street. Colourful garments were hanging behind the glass panes of the old shop *Hall and Anderson*. Bang opposite Chowringhee, I saw the statue of Outram Saheb still riding his horse and looking back at us with imperial contempt. (James Outram was the British general who suppressed the Great Mutiny in Lucknow in 1857-58, and as a homage to him the colonial rulers put up his statue at the spot leading to the Maidan from the Park Street-Chowringhee crossing– which was allowed to remain there by the post-Independence regime, till it was removed at the end of 1967

when a non-Congress government was installed in West Bengal). I avoided his gaze and entered Park Street. Connoisseurs of food had begun to converge in Peiping restaurant. Book lovers were coming out of Oxford Book Store, with their hands full of packets containing newly bought books.

I peeped through the glass door of the Olympia bar – and saw that the entire crowd was there. I pushed open the door. On the right, the long upholstered sofa adjacent to the door was occupied by Satya Brata Chaterjee (that is, SB); Niranjan Majumdar, the Associate Editor of the *Statesman,* who had once-under the pseudonym Ranjan - written in Bangla a superb travelogue on Darjeeling in winter, which he named 'Sheete Upekshita' (The Neglected Heroine in Winter), capturing the loneliness of the deserted tourist hill-resort in the cold weather. But Niranjan no longer speaks Bangla ! Among others, there was Gour Ghosh (of *Anandabazar Patrika* – a veteran journalist and well-known novelist, worshipped as Ğour-da' by his young admirers). In a corner sat Gopal Ghosh (the famous painter), who was sketching single-mindedly on a paper serviette. Opposite them, occupying a few chairs sat some others - the chief among them was my old friend Dhritin Chakraborty, who was talking endlessly; next to him sat the poet Shakti Chattopadhyay, who, having drunk quite a lot in the meanwhile, was now shaking his hand to impede the rush of Dhritin's words. In one corner, Mriganka Ray of Calcutta Film Society sat quietly, biting his nails as usual.

As soon as I pushed open the door and entered, Dhritin shouted at me: "Here, that fucking idiot Banerjee has arrived." Then he gave me a big smile, hugged me and said, "I can't tell you how much we missed you, Sumanta!"

Seeing an empty chair, I sat down, and asked him: "Order a rum, and cut out all your tall talk!"

Ordering a peg of rum, he went back swiftly as usual to whatever he was discussing. As far as I could grasp it, the

subject was the military strategy by which American forces could be vanquished in Iraq. Dhritin had a 'thesis' of his own on this. He was giving out a long list of military successes, like Kutuzov's ingenuity in warfare as narrated in *War and Peace*, the leadership of Marshal Zhukov in the Second World War, and the success of the guerilla war of Giap in Vietnam. He was peppering all this with some wondrous one or two-line quotes from sources that were far removed from each other – like a maxim of the Chinese military expert Sun Tzu now, and some comment of the English novelist Graham Greene's the next movement.

They were fireworks of words that could nonplus you. But one had to admire Dhritin's exceptional memory!

At one point, I interrupted him and said, "Why don't you talk about somebody in this country gaining fame, instead of naming so many foreigners? Have you forgotten about yourself?"

Dhritin was initially taken aback and shut up. Then he remembered. He patted me on my back and laughing out loudly, recited his famous utterance, "In future, Lenin will be known as Dhritin of Russia."

All of us thumped the table and shouted, "Bravo! This is what is called patriotism."

Shakti, beside himself in glee, got up from his chair and started dancing with his glass in his hand.

"This is why Bengalis never achieved anything," piped up Gour-da. "No matter how many slogans of patriotism you mouth, you ultimately have to take the name of some foreign leader or expert in order to establish yourselves."

"No, Gour-da," I objected. "There are a few exceptions."

"Such as?" enquired Gour-da.

I now turned towards Niranjan Majumdar. He was listening quietly all this while. He was a slightly built man. Fair complexioned, and wore broad-rimmed glasses over his two bright eyes. "Do you remember, Niranjanbabu," I asked, "that an editorial was printed in the *Statesman* after the death

of that great theatre personality Sisir Bhaduri? It was probably written by you."

"May be," said Niranjan, smiling softly.

"You had written in it that Sisirbabu laughed at efforts to set up minor playwrights as Shakespeares of Shyambazar or Molieres of Manicktola."

"He was indeed an exception!" Niranjan said, shaking his head. "Patriotism did not impair his critical judgment!" Then he paused a little and said, "Remember how he declined the Padma Bhushan award? He thought poorly of the government's flirtation with artists and the arts."

Niranjan then started picking up the books on his table. It was time for him to leave. Bending a little, he said in a tender voice, "But Sisir Bhaduri will be remembered long not only by theatre-lovers but also by those who teach English and feel that the classroom is not quite enough for communicating Shakespeare."

Clutching onto the books under his elbow, Niranjan Majumdar got up. Before going out, he looked at me and said, "If you aren't doing anything tomorrow for lunch, why don't you come down to Amber? Lindsay will be there!"

Lindsay was Lindsay Emerson, the associate editor of the *Statesman*. I wasn't that well acquainted with him. But I liked the man. He was a bit restless and kind of eccentric. I have heard that during the period when the British owned the *Statesman*, although he was the seniormost among the associate editors, he had not been made the editor because he had married a Bengali - Mrinalini Bonnerjee (of the family of W.C. Bonnerjee), later known as Minni Bonnerjee.

***

Prashanta arrived at Olympia around ten at night. With him was the writer Samaresh Basu. Samaresh dragged me away from Dhritin and others and sat me down at another table. He had the same wide smile on his face. "Do you remember?" he said. "When I met you last in Delhi, I had spoken to you

about writing a book on the artist Ram Kinkar. But Kinkarda left when I was halfway through. So, as soon as I finished the first instalment of the book, I took off in a hurry to reach here. There is unlimited time here at my disposal. I don't have to churn out the heap of trash for the puja annuals of *Desh* and *Anandabazar* every year any more."

"So how do you spend your time?" I enquired.

With great enthusiasm, Samaresh thumped on the table and said, "Ah, that is exactly what I am talking about. Now it is just *adda* and more *adda*, sitting with Kinkarda." Samaresh then brought his face close to mine, as if he was telling me something secret, and said, "He has given me a lot of new information about his life. He has remembered those things after coming here. This is a world of memories. You will also recall a lot of things as you continue to stay here, I'm sure."

Leaning against the chair, Samaresh then took a long sip from his glass of whiskey and said, "I am, therefore, rewriting the book *Dekhi Nai Phire* (I Never Looked Back) totally from cover to cover."

"Wow! That will be terrific!" I exclaimed. "But the readers of that world will not get an opportunity to read the new book."

"Perhaps they will not get it at present," Samaresh announced, assured in his self-confidence. "But what about the future? They will *all* have to come here."

Soon after, Samaresh curled his lips slightly and smiled mischievously in his customary way. I knew for sure that he was about to titillate me with some drollery! He drew near and said, "Do you know who I met after coming here?"

"Who?" I asked curiously.

He suppressed that smile at the corner of his mouth and said, "Shobhna Butani." I got startled. I recalled a lot of things about days long past. Delhi - was it 1971? Samaresh had come to Delhi. I was introducing him to my friends on the lawns of Sapru House. At that juncture, suddenly there appeared our friend - Shobhna Butani !

Shobhna was an extremely vivacious young woman, and very large-hearted. She was the Queen Bee of the avant-garde society of young film buffs and theatre activists of Delhi in those days. She was full of affection. Within moments, Samaresh and Shobhna hit it off. There is a current phrase these days to explain these things- "Just a matter of their mutual chemistry, what else?" When he returned to Kolkata, Samaresh wrote a novel about Shobhna - *Amrita Bisher Patre* (In the Vessel of Ambrosial Poison), under the pseudonym 'Kalkut.'

Shobhna's life was tragic. She had got married to a young man known to us. The marriage did not last long. Then she went off to Bombay. She made friends with a young film director. We suddenly heard one day that both of them had jumped into the sea and died. To this day, I don't know whether it was an accident or a suicide.

Samaresh had finished his glass. I was also gearing to get up. It was almost eleven. Olympia would shut shop shortly. Suddenly, the words of a song came floating in from the rear in a full-throated voice that I had been familiar with for long – the first line of Rabindranath's song – "Krishnakoli ! It's only her that I...."

I looked back – and lo and behold! It was exactly as I thought. The two brothers Hori-da and Moni-da were sitting at the table at the back. Moni-da looked at me and continued singing, his face breaking into a smile, "...No matter how dark she is, I've been smitten by her black, doe-like eyes..."

Hori-da's face was small, like that of a naughty child. "Hello? Remember us?" he said laughingly.

Wouldn't I know them? This pair of brothers were like permanent fixtures at Olympia. They were both house agents. Their office was behind the neighbouring Park Street. Moni-da had learnt music from Shailajananda Majumdar (the famous exponent of Rabindranath's songs) at Santinikentan in his childhood. Currently, he would practise Rabindrasangeet sitting at Olympia, just moments

before the clock struck eleven, prior to the closing of the bar.

One by one, we all descended onto the road. Bidding farewell to one another, we headed in the direction of our respective homes.

I hailed a taxi going towards Ballygunje.

***

One evening, I was sitting at home, chatting with Boudi while drinking tea. Ma came in suddenly and announced, "See who has come."

I turned back to see Dipen Bandyopadhyay entering the room with his little steps. He had that familiar Shantiniketani sling bag on his shoulder and wore a brown Khadi kurta with white pajamas. Dipen was junior to me by a year at Scottish Church College, where we both participated in the Communist movement in the 1950s. Besides, Dipen was an acclaimed writer of short stories and novels. He left us in 1979.

Immediately after entering the room, he dragged me out of the chair, took me under his arm and addressing my mother and Boudi said, "Mashima (Aunty) and Boudi, I'm taking this fellow to Coffee House."

"Wait, I'll get some tea right away," Ma pleaded. But who would listen? Never mind that he was short in stature! His hands were pretty strong. He literally pulled me out from the house and made me get down on the road. Running along with him, I got onto a moving tram.

Sitting on one of the benches, Dipen took out his snuff-box from his pocket and took a pinch of it. He then looked at me sternly and asked, "You've become too smart, haven't you?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

Continuing in the same manner, Dipen said, "You've been here for quite some time now. And yet, you never

thought of looking me up! What do you think of yourself, you rascal?"

"How would I know where you are?" I replied.

"Cut out that crap! In College Street, there is a place called Coffee House. Have you wiped it clean off your memory?"

Really! I hadn't thought of it. I was going to say with a sheepish face, "Do you know the actual reason? These last few days..."

Dipen cut me short and reprimanded me in the voice of a schoolmaster: "Let it be - that's enough. I know - you have been gallivanting all around Chowringhee and Park Street for these last few days. You have been spotted at many places. Every piece of news reaches my ears."

I then laughed to try to assuage Dipen's hurt pride and said, "Okay, I hold my ears and confess that it was a grave oversight. It will never happen again. I will present myself in Coffee House everyday from now onwards."

We reached College Street in no time. Both of us got down. I found that those book stalls were still there – temporary fixtures on the outer railings of Presidency College, storing and selling old and rare books from makeshift shelves, to be removed at night and re-installed the next morning. The road wasn't too crowded. But once we entered Coffee House, I could make out the familiar sounds from a crowded hall. There was a haze of smoke. We sat at a table and ordered two cups of 'infusion' (black coffee). Then I turned towards Dipen and said, "Do you know? After you left and came here, I suddenly got a letter in Delhi from some publishers - I can't recall who - from Kolkata who wanted to bring out English translations of your writings. They requested me to choose a story of yours. I chose a story, and did translate it, and sent it too - within the deadline. But till date I have not heard anything from them. I don't even know whether that book eventually came out."

Dipen remained silent for a while and asked, "Which story did you translate?"

"*Swayambar Sabha*" I replied.

"Why did you choose that story?" He wanted to know.

"I don't know why, but in it you seemed to grasp our mood and tenor of those times," I answered.

"And my novel *Tritiya Bhuban*?" Dipen asked with a note of impatience in his voice.

"I knew you would ask this question" I laughed and said. "In *Tritiya Bhuban*, you had faithfully captured the ambience of the political agitations, friendships, love relationships of our student days in Scottish Church College, but you know what..."

Before I could finish my words, I felt somebody's hand slap me on my back. I turned and raised my head to see Boudhayan Chattopadhyay. He gave me a sweet smile and asked, "When did you come?" Boudhayan-da was an old Communist and an economist of considerable fame – who had taught at various universities, both abroad and in India, including JNU (Jawaharlal Nehru University) in Delhi. Once he joined us at our table, the discussion then turned in another direction - the economy of the country, world politics, the education system in schools and colleges and finally, the condition and destiny of the world of intellectuals in Delhi.

There was no end to Boudhayan-da's curiosity - what were his former colleagues and friends in Delhi doing? Where, what new research was going on? Who were the people dominating the intellectual scene at 'Teen Murti'? What was the fate of the Sapru House library? Which were the new theories that the Leftist intellectuals were busy discussing?

Tired of answering these questions, I said, "Boudhayan-da, the intellectual world of the capital has changed a lot since our generation. Nobody bothers about Marxism and all that any more. Now it is the age of 'po-mo' and 'sa-ban.'

Dipen had possibly not heard me correctly. He nodded in agreement with me and said, "Yes. Now there is a movement for the rights of homosexuals."

I struck Dipen's hand hard and said, "Damn, you ass! Its 'po-mo' not 'homo'- meaning, the initial syllables of post-modernism'."

"Ok, I understand po-mo', " Boudhayan said. "But where did 'sa-ban' come from?"

"That is the abbreviated version of subaltern'," I replied. "Sa-ban' – in other words, soap in Bengali! With the soap of their theory, those guys are washing and bleaching history to give it a spring-clean."

Boudhayan-da was going to ask some more questions. I interrupted him and said, "Look here, Boudhayan-da, if one had to explain the state of Delhi's academic world, one could say in one sentence that it is now the empire of the three Dadas."

"What do you mean?" Boudhayan-da asked, knitting his brows.

Counting on my fingers, I said, "Derrida, Foucault-da and Ashis-da."

Forever hooked on his familiar mannerism, Boudhayan now began to rub his thumb with his forefinger and wanted to know, "Derrida and Foucault I can understand. But who is this Ashis-da?"

"Why?"' I retorted. "Don't you remember Ashis Nandy?"

Totally baffled by this, Boudhayan-da uttered in amazement - "Oh, my God!" and got up from his chair.

I realized now that I shouldn't have brought up the name, remembering the scrap that Boudhayan-da and Ashis got into several years ago over issues like 'secularism', 'scientific inquiry', etc.

As soon as Boudhayan-da left, a horde of poets, artists and litterateurs came up at Dipen's table. Among them, I could recognize Purnendu Patri, the versatile poet and artist, who among other things left behind before he departed, a rich collection of his reportages and poems about the heroic Tebhaga peasants' movement in Bengal in the late 1940s. He was just as preoccupied and serious as before. As if he

had met me only the day before, he said, "Sumanta, there is a meeting at my place at six in the evening tomorrow. I have kept your name among the group of editors." After listening to them for sometime, I gathered that they were gearing up to bring out a new literary journal. Dipen and Purnendu would be the joint editors. They were preparing a list of poets, story-writers, essayists who had newly arrived in this world. I had arrived recently, so they wanted to know who were getting ready to come here - that is, who were about to die. I tried to remember. The faces of a few of them came floating into my mind. After mulling over for a moment, I gave out their names. I assured Dipen and Purnendu that they would not have to wait long for them!

As I was getting out from Coffee House, I suddenly heard my name being called out from the left - "Hey Sumanta!"

I looked back and saw that the table in the corner right next to the window was occupied by Gagan Dutta and Nirmalya Acharya. Nirmalya had a bale of proofs in his hands. I turned back from the exit and proceeded towards their table. Pulling a chair, I said, "So *Mashai,* are you bringing out *Ekshan* here too?" *Ekshan* was the magazine which Nirmalya, along with our friend, the actor Soumitra Chattopadhyay, used to bring out for several years – each issue stamped by Satyajit Ray's unique cover design. It went extinct after Nirmalya's death.

Nirmalya smiled gently and said, "A husking pedal pounds the grain even in heaven."

I looked at Gagan. "What grain are you pounding?" I asked.

Gagan said, "Don't you remember? When you visited me the last time, I had told you about my plan."

I remembered. Was it 1980 or 81? It was a long night we had spent at Gagan's flat in Ulster Gardens in London. There was the painter Moni Jana - and me. Gagan had made us listen to some symphony recordings of Gustav Mahler, the Austrian musician and composer of the early twentieth

century. He was taken up with Mahler at that time. He was trying to make two tone-deaf listeners like us understand that Mahler's various experimental symphonies represented the connection between romanticism and modernity in the history of Western music.

Actually, Gagan must have wanted to do research on a similar twilight world in the history of our Indian music where romanticism and modernity encountered each other for the first time.

Gagan had told us that evening, "I will go back to India. I will open a studio. Whatever songs and music I have recorded, I will take them back. I will then open an archives for everybody."

Now, I turned to Gagan and said, "How far has that project of yours advanced?"

"Come and see," Gagan said.

"Where?" I asked.

Gagan now smiled a smile befitting an elder brother (He was really older than us), "Why, don't you remember our house on Tamer Lane?"

He stirred my memory with a sudden and forceful tug. On the first floor of that house, there used to be so many *addas* in Gagan's room. There gathered in that room, evening after evening – the familiar pair called Pulu and Lalu (the former being the nickname of the actor Soumitra Chattopadhyay and the latter of Sushanta Bandyopadhyay); Ashok Palit (who wrote poetry and had an excellent voice for recitation); Tapan Dutta (Gagan's younger brother - he used to keep us enthralled by singing Rabindrasangeet); Ramen Mitra (our friend - a student of history and dedicated worker of the Communist party), and so many other friends- Saila Ghosh, Bimal Chakrabarty....

Guessing the reminiscences of my mental universe, Gagan said, "Not everybody has reached here yet. But so what? You and Nirmalya are here. Come along. I have made a great studio in that room in Tamer Lane."

I got excited, and was going to say something, when all of a sudden Keya (Chakrabarty) came and stood before me. "When did you come, Sumanta-da?" she asked. Keya was my pupil when I taught for a brief while at Scottish Church College. But more importantly, she emerged as a great actress with the Nandikar group headed by Ajitesh Banerjee. She died in a freak accident of drowning.

I got up. I urged her, "Come along, Keya. Let's go and sit quietly somewhere."

I took her outside, near the steps of Coffee House. "Listen, there are many things I have to say to you," I said.

Keya twisted her lips in an ironic smile and said, "Its too late now, Sumanta-da. Couldn't you have said them earlier?"

I was hesitantly going to give an explanation, but Keya stopped me and diverted me to a different topic altogether. "Come to the Academy of Fine Arts next Sunday morning," she said. "There is a new production of Nandikar under the direction of Ajitesh-da. I have a small role."

"What is the play?" I asked.

Sounding a little apologetic, she answered, "You know we usually do only adaptations. This play is an adaptation of a novel by a Hungarian writer - *Embers* by Sandor Marai.

She then smiled mischievously, and said, "The story is up your street! You must come to see the play." With those parting words, Keya went back to Coffee House.

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I woke up the next morning at the crack of dawn. I went to the balcony and saw that the winter fog had started receding. A tram was screeching out from its depot. One or two old men had got out for a walk in the *Temporary Park* in front of our house. A train from Canning had just reached and stopped at Ballygunje station. I heard its whistle. From the train, a group of fisherwomen had come out – walking down the street now in a sprightly gait, carrying baskets of fish on their heads, their hips swaying rhythmically to their steps.

They were all rushing to the Gariahat market.

Suddenly, I heard a slight sound on the main door of our flat. It seemed as if somebody was gently knocking on the door outside. Who had come so early? Even Ma, Baba, and Boudi had perhaps not yet woken up at this hour! I, therefore, had to answer the call.

I opened the door to see Bhabani Chaudhuri standing at the foot of the stairs. He had that familiar apologetic look on his face, a good-natured smile, rather defensive - as if to say he had done something very wrong! He had a stubble that must have grown over the last two or three days. He looked haggard. He was wearing a pair of grey trousers, and a dirty shawl hung over his shirt. He held a packet of books.

I hurried forward, held his hand and brought him inside. He freed his hand, and said uncertainly but with a smile, "Oh, no, no ! But I...won't sit for long..."

I forcibly took him into my room, sat him down on a chair and said, "Wait. Let me first arrange for some tea."

In his characteristic manner, Bhabani continued in the same vein, "But Sumanta! No, no! What is all this fuss...?"

Without heeding what he said, I entered the kitchen. I saw that Ma had got up and was lighting the stove. "Bhabani has come," I whispered to her. "He must be famished. Could you give him some toast, omelette and something else with tea?"

Re-entering my room, I saw Bhabani opening his packet of books. Some posters printed in red ink came out of it. One was a copy of *Deshabrati* (the underground journal of the CPI-Marxist-Leninist). He forwarded it to me and said, "This is our latest issue. You will get all the news here."

He then looked at me and said, "I have come to you with a special request."

"What is it?" I asked curiously.

"The comrades are waiting for you," he said in a soft voice. "They have requested me to take you back with me."

I got startled. "Who?" I blurted out.

Bhabani started naming them one by one, and all the doors of my mind that had remained shut for so long opened up one after another. Kabul, Jaideb, Shamsul - Telenipara, Kamalpur- martyrs of face-to-face confrontations with the police; martyrs killed by torture inside police lock-ups; martyrs shot inside jails; martyrs covered all over with wounds in the burnt houses of peasants; martyrs drenched in blood on wintry roads; martyrs at the altar of political fratricide - there is no end to the list. I remembered that old song that was popular among us in those days: "How many lives have been sacrificed at the steps of the altar of liberty? Their names trickle down in every drop of tear."

"How many more lives?" Looking at Bhabani's face, I left the question unuttered. He was looking at me fervently with a steady gaze. With intense hope, he was waiting to hear what I would say in reply to his appeal.

I took the decision instantaneously. "Let's go," I said.

After getting done with tea and breakfast, both of us got up. "Don't worry, it will be night by the time I return," I said to Ma. "You all finish your dinner and go off to sleep."

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Bhabani and I caught a train and got down at Sheoraphuli station. Moving through the tea shops, the stalls selling vegetable fritters, the groceries, and the rows of cycle rickshaws on both sides of the road, we finally descended into that familiar sloping trail leading to our den. It was a narrow path through the paddy fields. The fields around stretched endlessly. After walking a little, I could recognize, among the shelter of trees, that old mud hut thatched with hay. This was that room of Pralay's, where Bhabani had brought me one day, somewhat more than thirty years ago. It was here that we conducted meetings night after night.

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Seeing us, they came out of the hut. I could recognize everybody. They held up their clenched fists to give me a Red salute. It was after a long passage of time that I too raised my unaccustomed hand in the forgotten salute today.

After that, we entered the hut one by one and sat on the mat placed on the floor. I remembered that before the meeting started, we would have to pay homage to the martyrs of our movement. Everybody had to say a few words recalling the comrades who had been killed. I was thinking about what I would say when my turn came. At which point, Kabul seemed to interrupt my thoughts and said, "Tell us about yourself, Agnu-da."

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His words brought me out of my stupor. 'Agnu' was the 'tek-name'—the pseudonym given to me by the party during my underground days. I realized only then that there was no need to commemorate martyrs at today's meeting. I was sitting in front of the martyrs themselves. I then remembered a favourite song of those days, "We'll meet again in the world of martyrs..."

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"But Kabul-bhai, I wasn't able to become a martyr like you people!" I protested, staring blankly at Kabul. Now Jaideb smiled back from the other side, and said, "So what? Neither is Bibhutida." 'Bibhuti' was Bhabani's 'tek-name.' I remembered that like me, Bhabani also had reached this world without being killed by police bullets – unlike Jaideb, Kabul and others – but after months of a painful ailment. Jaideb said, "Should one make such class distinctions amongst ourselves, Agnu-da? All our troubles today are because of these hierarchical differences that we have created. What's the difference? We are martyrs, you are not – but the pain of the torment that we all are suffering from remains the

same." I nodded my head in agreement. Remaining silent for a while, I said, "Tell me where I should start from."

Kabul said, "Tell us whatever you want to. After all, this is not Lord Sinha Road."

I couldn't help laughing. I recalled the days and nights that I spent in the cell at the Intelligence Branch headquarters on Lord Sinha Road. After my arrest, in reply to the detective police officers' grilling there, I had, in my deposition, offered concoctions of truth and falsehood in order to cheat them. Till now, I had remained incarcerated within the pages of those statements of mine that were documented in their office. After so long, today at last I found an opportunity to liberate myself from that captivity. I now geared up to pour out my heart to all these fellow sufferers of mine - those who had been my intimate companions and associates through much joy and sorrow in the past.

I started to dig up my memory with great effort. In our 'underground' lives, we had trained ourselves to forget everything - our past, the origin of our class - so that we could be 'declassed' and unite in soul and spirit with landless peasants, so that we could push into oblivion our own individuality by demolishing our legacy. In a well thought out, systematic way, we had tried to forget the names of comrades and the addresses of those who sheltered us, so that in the face of police torture, even at some unguarded moment we could never let those names pass our mouths. We had pledged and steeled ourselves to completely obliterate our memory.

Today, after so many years, I tried desperately to scrape at that very memory in order to unearth its residues. I started talking about how I had escaped from Kolkata with the help of some friends. Assisted by Khalil Chacha ('Uncle Khalil' - an old worker comrade of Ahmedabad who in his youth had been an associate of S.A. Dange in the Girni Kamgaar Union in Bombay in the 1930s and had joined our politics in the

decade of the seventies), I had found shelter at a *chawl* – a slum adjacent to Topi Mills in Ahmedabad. Then, after a brief stay at my in-laws' in Hyderabad, I moved over to Bangalore and lived incognito for a few months at a friend's place there.

In Bangalore, I would go to the Cubbon Park Library every afternoon. I would read in the newspapers that our outposts and hideouts in Bengal were getting destroyed one by one. I got to know that my comrades - Bhabani Choudhury, Satyabrata Dutta and Mahadeb Mukherjee – had been arrested. In the evening, after returning to my room, I would sit at my typewriter and write the history of the Naxalbari movement.

Bhabani interrupted my words. "That red typewriter?" he asked.

Everybody started laughing. One of them said, "Do you know, Agnu-da? The police had hassled us so much about the whereabouts of that typewriter of yours - as if it were a deadly weapon!"

"They were in fact, searching for it to bring it up as an evidence in the case against us," Bhabani explained. "It was that typewriter that Agnu used to type out the English articles for *Liberation* (the English underground journal of the CPI-Marxist-Leninist)."

I listened to them silently. I remembered that my favourite little red Olivetti typewriter was the gift of a sister-in-law of mine. It was an old companion. Whenever there would be an outstation assignment for the *Statesman*, I used to take it along with me so that I could send my dispatches. It was quite rough and tough; and yet quite amenable to my mood and temper. So when I brought it along with me during my underground stint, it adapted itself quite easily. Its keyboard kept typing those fiery and verbose writings of our party journal *Liberation* with equal alacrity. Did it recall the words of a totally different writing style of the *Statesman* of the past? Who knows!

But it was an irony of history that *Liberation* and the *Statesman* did indeed at one time develop a secret link. In 1973-4, some issues of *Liberation* were produced by the printing press of the *Statesman.* A few comrades from the workers' union of the *Statesman* embraced our political ideology then. Deep at night after completing their night shift, or in their spare time on certain holidays (when the *Statesman* didn't come out), they used to secretly print copies of *Liberation* and place it in our hands.

I was mulling over these memories when Jaideb asked, "But Agnu-da, how did you get caught?"

I thought for a while and said, "May be I wanted to get caught. Left alone, how long could I have kept dodging them? And then, when I saw that every one of my comrades was being arrested? After all, the bird wants to get back to its flock." Then I paused a little and tried to remember. Was it the year 1975? While living in Hyderabad, I had written an article for the *Economic and Political Weekly*, possibly mentioning the class distinctions among the scheduled castes who made a living by farming in Andhra Pradesh. I had signed it in my own name. As a result perhaps, the detective department of the police could locate me. Later when they arrested and took me to Lord Sinha Road, an officer there bragged, "It was after reading your article in EPW that we guessed you are in Hyderabad." I don't know whether it was true or not.

Recalling those past incidents, I said, "Right after the Emergency was declared in 1975, I got arrested in Hyderabad. But there was no case against me in Hyderabad. You would remember that we were all accused in the Kamalpur conspiracy case - Kamalpur in Burdwan in West Bengal was where our party congress was held. Before sending me to Burdwan, they kept me in the Secunderabad jail—the main jail in Hyderabad - for some days."

Image after image floated in slowly before my eyes. It was now easy for me to begin narrating without a pause,

"Within the compound of the prison, behind the main prison, there was a row of cells. They locked me up in one of those cells the day before they sent me to Burdwan. I lay alone, unable to get a wink of sleep. Suddenly I heard somebody humming in Telugu from the adjacent cell. I could make out only the words 'Naxalbari' and 'Srikakulam'. I got up with a start. With my ears to the wall, I tried to listen with rapt attention. But I couldn't catch the voice any more- it faded into the distance. I awoke the next morning and was sitting quietly inside the cell. I suddenly saw somebody walking fast in the narrow verandah in front of my cell. Seeing me awake and arise, he came and stood with his hands on the grill in front of my cell. He had a crop of curly, black hair; He was of powerful build. "What's your case?" he asked me. "Naxal," I said. He then raised his hand in a Red salute. After that, he started talking in broken Hindi. "I am Bhumaiyah," he introduced himself. I stood stunned. Bhumaiyah and Kishta Gaur were two legendary heroes - two peasant leaders of the Naxalbari movement from the Adilabad district in Andhra Pradesh. Accused of executing notorious landlords, they had been sentenced to death. From then onwards, leaders and activists of the Human Rights movement across India had been carrying on an agitation to revoke the sentence. They had been able to keep it in abeyance so far. "I don't have time to wait," said Bhumaiyah. "Every morning, they let me walk outside the cell for just five minutes. Now it is Kishta Gaur's turn to come out. Adieu, comrade." Clenching his fist in a Red salute, Bhumaiyah went away. I stood holding the bars of my cell. The person who came after sometime was a man of short stature, with a round face and a bald pate. He gave me a gentle smile, and introduced himself, "I am Kishta Gaur." He then extended a packet of *Charminar* towards me. I was about to take out a cigarette when he said, "Keep the whole pack." That was my first and last meeting with the two of them. After that I was transported to the jail in Burdwan. On a morning in

December 1975, I suddenly got the news that Bhumaiyah and Kishta Gaur had been executed. In our cell in Burdwan jail, some of us Naxal prisoners held a memorial meeting on that day to pay homage to the two martyrs. I remembered that Bhumaiya and Kishta Gaur had said, "We know we will be hanged. We are, therefore, donating our eyes. We could not see the triumph of the revolution, but those who get our eyes, will."

I stopped at this point.

There was a long silence after this. We finished another round of tea served in small earthen pots. We lit our *bidi*s. "But Agnu-da, what is happening now?," Kabul asked a little while later. "We hear that a Red Corridor has been carved out from Jharkhand and Bihar in the north all the way down to Andhra Pradesh. All of Dandakaranya is now a liberated zone."

"But Agnu-da, the struggle now is on a much bigger scale, isn't it?", asked Jaideb very excitedly. "See how it has spread everywhere! And the weapons are also of a much higher quality. This is no longer the era of our hand-made pipe guns and primitive bombs!"

I looked at the faces of Bhabani, Kabul, Jaideb, Shamsul and others, gazing at me with eager expectation. They wanted to hear from me - the newly arrived person from that other world - all its fresh news. But what could I tell them? During all these years, I had cut myself loose from them and their concerns. How could I explain? Looking at their faces, I forced an expression of a smile on my face, and trying to infuse a tone of self-confidence in my voice, said, "Certainly." But the word sounded so vacuous - even to me!

It was getting late – and dark. I would have to return home now. Bhabani would stay back. He'd have to attend an important meeting all through the night about some serious matter. They put me in charge of a young boy, who escorted me back to Sheoraphuli station, carrying a hurricane lantern all through the stretch of the road. I managed to get on to the last train.

It was very late at night when I got down at Howrah station. A few lights flickered dimly on the platform. Some people were sleeping curled up with blankets on the benches. Seeing me, a dog came forward barking, smelt me and went back. I came out of the gate at the station.

In front of the gate, I saw two beggars. They were beating their sticks on the road and mumbling something. Approaching them to give them some money, I found that both of them were blind. One of them had a crop of curly black hair and was of powerful build. Another was of short stature, with a round face and bald pate. Neither of them was begging. I pricked up my ears and listened to their words. In a kind of broken Hindi, they were muttering, "Where are our eyes? Who are the people who got them? Would you be able to find them?"