A Memoir

by Bina Das

Liberated from capitalist control to educate the masses by Socialist Stories

INTRODUCTION

The fifteenth of August is drawing near. Though our minds are filled with despair and heavy with despondency, though dark shades of doubt loom large, the thought that we are becoming free at last, not in our dreams but in reality, flashes like lightning through our thrilled souls.

We have attained freedom. The British are leaving this country forever. I look around at the faces of my companions. Why do they look so lost and depressed? Why is the country not glowing under the rising sun of liberty? Is this the 'freedom' of our dreams? A dream marred by separation, fratricide, a cruel game of Holi being played with blood, a conflict of petty self-interest? Still in spite of all this, we do not wish to forget that India, our motherland, is cleansing herself from the murky gloom of bondage; she is emerging as a free nation. The bastions of foreign dominance are no longer barring our paths. Maybe, today we are unable to appreciate the significance of this event; but, in the course of time we shall comprehend and true realisation will dawn upon those, our future progeny, who will build a golden future for our nation on the foundation of this hard-earned freedom.

Today, our nation stands at the crossroads of destiny. Dark agonising nights are over and a glorious dawn lies ahead. What a

wonderful moment of light and shade! A moment when we pause, our steps slow down, we look around with strange dreams in our eyes! We were marching ahead, breathlessly like power-driven machines, with the one aim of 'freedom' before us. We had no mercy for ourselves, nor did we have any consideration for others; without rest or respite we marched onwards as if we were being whipped on by a cruel task-master. Today we have arrived and LIBERTY and FREEDOM shine in block letters in front of us. We seem to doubt our eyes; looking around, we fail to believe that we have been rushing towards this. Already there are voices murmuring. '*Hethai noi, onno katha, onno konokhane.*' (Not here, not this, but something different elsewhere.)

But at this dawn of freedom, in the shades of the twilight, let me ponder for a moment. In the dim glimmer of this morning light I wish to turn over the pages of my life and attempt an evaluation. A new age will soon arrive, and we shall all be ready to welcome it. In the vast upsurge of new life we shall not be left behind. In the meantime let me pause for a moment and think about the days that are passing by. I wish to capture the music of the time in my pages. I know the past will soon be forgotten, memories of the painful days that are no more will be lost in the midst of the vital problems of the present. Still I hope that the poignant music of the past will not strike a discordant note in the glorious dawn of a new India. Maybe travellers will stop for a moment and look back with a chastened mind at the sad departed days.

ONE

Often friends have asked for the story of my life. I could never satisfy their curiosity for I could not think of what to say. Again, I felt how much of one's innermost emotions can a person express in words? Now, I shall not try to do the impossible with pen on paper. I shall only try to put in words the variegated experiences of my thirty-six years of existence in this eventful age. My life is of little importance, but I cannot ignore the deep impressions left upon me by the numerous persons I have known, and their sorrows and sacrifices. The storm that snatched me away from the tranquility of my happy home thrust me into the vast whirlwind of action that brought the nation to the threshold of freedom from the midst of dull despondency. Every line of my story will echo the sound of this rising storm. But it is true that if I write I shall have to spin my story around myself. I can only unfold the mirror of my mind on which I find reflected moving pictures of so many travellers. I do not have the impersonal attitude of an artist. These pictures I shall paint will be coloured by my joy and sorrow, with the brush of my desires. Maybe the end result will be marred by exaggeration, self praise, and wishful dreams, but I console myself with the belief that nature always finds expression through the human mind. Life unfolds itself in the individual. Thus, no man is alone or alienated or useless.

TWO

My childhood was spent at home in the midst of the love of my doting parents. I was the youngest among all my brothers and sisters, with the exception of one brother who came eight years after me. So, for quite some time I enjoyed being the youngest and as a result became extremely pampered and wilful. In fits of anger I would hang on to my sisters' braids and refuse to let go. Of course, I do not remember these tantrums! But I remember how I would sit on the floor and cry endlessly and not even my mother could calm me down. When my father would come home he would pick me up and holding me over his shoulder, he would say, 'Is this magic? You are taller than I am?' And forgetting my tears I would smile. This became a habit with me I would not stop crying until father came and performed this trick.

As a child I did not play with friends of my age. I loved to spend time on my mother's lap listening to her stories or relating my own tales. I continued doing this even after I grew up; I had to relate everything to her on returning home. I never found a better listener than her.

I also remember listening to my eldest sister reading poems and teaching me how to recite. As a child she made me learn a number of poems from Rabindranath's *Shishu* by heart and I often had to

recite them in front of audiences. My sisters would dress me up and take me to functions at their schools and colleges where I had to recite. I just repeated the words without understanding the sense of the poems.

I remember the day I first appreciated the beauty of poetry. It was raining outside, and sitting beside an open window my Didi was reciting 'Nadi' (The River) from *Shishu*. I was lost to the world as I sat watching my sister's face and listening to the poem. I was overwhelmed by a new emotion. I did not realise it then, but now I understand that it was my first comprehension of poetic beauty.

Joyously, on another day I requested Didi to read the poem to Anudi, my cousin. Didi gladly complied but the effect was not the same as on the previous occasion. Maybe then Didi's voice and the poetic rhythm had combined with the sound of the rain to create something unique which could not be revived.

My early education started with my parents at home. They loved to teach their children and did not send us to school for quite some time. Our introduction to the letters was done in the happy ambience of our home. I read my first book sitting by mother as she worked in the kitchen. I had no trouble learning the languages, Bengali and English, but at night when father wanted me to repeat the tables after him, I felt so sleepy I could not stop my tears.

There is something else I remember. Often father would sit with us and in his deep voice read plays like *Bhishma*, *Shahajahan* and others by D.L. Roy. That was my first introduction to the heroic and the tragic in drama. I tried to imitate father's voice as he recited, 'then there was Bhishma.' Once, we brothers and sisters staged *Shahajahan* at home. I played the part of Jaharat-un-nisa. My performance was praised by all, most probably in consideration of my age, which was only ten at that time. 'I have not forgiven thee, assassin! Even if the world forgives thee, I shall not! Let my curse come down upon thee, like the venomous breath of an angry serpent!' The audience was charmed by my impassioned utterance. But later as I grew older my histrionic skill deterioriated. Maybe with age I grew self-conscious.

To be a good actor you have to forget yourself and not be conscious on stage. The same is true about a good orator. I was never good at conversation. Only with my parents was I free with words; with others I was most diffident. I was an introvert by nature. My mother was completely different temperamentally, and greatly enjoyed the company of people. She loved to attend gatherings and functions of all kinds, and she wanted us to accompany her, which we would most of the time refuse to do, much to her annoyance. She was displeased with us for being self-centred and unfeeling towards others. 'It's strange you don't want to share the happiness of others!'

Mother was enthusiastic about all kinds of social work. She organised women's groups through which she taught the poor how to read and write and also trained them in needle work. She was never in want of time for such work even though she had to look after her own family. She started an ashram for poor destitute women, where she faced many difficulties and had to deprive herself in unimaginable ways, but she never gave up her resolve; in fact she didn't even appear disturbed by it all.

As we grew up, my sister (Kalyani Bhattacharjee) and I got involved in political work. Our father used to say, 'All this you have learnt from your mother. I am a faint hearted person and cannot imagine getting involved in such enormous work.' But we always knew that it was father's inspiration that encouraged mother in all her work.

The most precious thing that we received from our father was the wealth of freedom which he gave us, even though his loving heart feared for our safety. We realised this when we compared ourselves with other girls our age. Seeing that I was so self-willed and headstrong, close friends and relatives would warn my father that he was being too indulgent and was spoiling me. Father was not perturbed and assured them that I would be all right when I grew up. I do not know about being 'spoiled', but of this I'm sure, that if I had not had my parents' encompassing love and care in my youth, I would not have been able to survive the rigours and trials of my later days. A girl I tried to recruit in college told me, 'I can tell

from your face that you have been brought up with an abundance of affection and tender love. You have received much from life, so you are ready to sacrifice so much.' These words often came to my mind later in life, in the loneliness of my prison cell, and on the harsh and inclement path of my political life.

I was only a child when the first wave of nationalism touched us. There was a lot of excitement in our home during the movement of 1921. My elder brother left his studies and was imprisoned for participating in the movement. The spinning wheel was introduced in our home, and I graduated from frock to *sari* in a coarse hand-spun *khadi* given by my father. Since then the name of Subhasbabu was often head in our home. He left the Indian Civil Service, and before leaving he wrote a letter asking for Father's permission to do so. Father replied—I overheard my elder sister talking about it. He was Father's favourite student. Subhasbabu greatly admired my father from his school days. In mother's desk we found emotional letters written by him to father in his boyish script: '*My rapport with you will not end in this life. Why else do I see you in my dreams? Why do I worship your image while awake?*

After the intensity of the 1921 movement had lessened, one evening father came home and told mother that he had met Subhasbabu at a meeting, and had invited him to dinner. He asked her to prepare something for him. I could not remember if I had seen Subhasbabu earlier, so this was going to be my first meeting, and with great excitement I awaited his arrival. But when he came no one could get me out of my room. After much coaxing I came out and mother introduced me to him saying, 'Subhas, my daughter here is a great admirer of yours.' A few days after this Subhasbabu and some others were arrested under the Bengal Ordinance.

At school I was the most important participant in all political discussions. I repeated all that I had heard about Subhasbabu from my father and added, 'We shall follow his path in future.'

I remember another incident very vividly. One day we heard in school that the British Viceroy's wife was coming to visit our school.

The day before that we were called from class to rehearse the programme of welcome. We would have to carry baskets of flowers and scatter the flowers at her feet as she entered the premises.

I was revolted by the idea and walked out of the rehearsal. The plan was so insulting. I sat quietly in a corner of the classroom with tears in my eyes. Two other girls also walked out and joined me. Much perturbed, we took a vow that we would sacrifice our lives for the freedom of our motherland. Later in life I often remembered this childish vow, and in moments of weakness it gave me strength and hardened my resolve.

Another important incident was my acquiring Sarat Chandra Chattopadhaya's *Pather Dabi*. I was then preparing for the matriculation examination. Learning that the book was banned, I felt a great compulsion to read it. I read it over and over again and almost had it by heart. In school too the book was the most important topic of discussion.

One night I saw father reading the book till three'o clock at night. Next morning he commented, 'A woman's common-sense approach is always better. Bharati's opinion is better than the Doctor's.' I argued with father on this point, and then went to school and continued the argument with the opposite stance with my friends. In the first paper of the matriculation examination on English there was a question, 'Write an essay on your favourite novel.' I wrote a long dissertation on *Pather Dabi* in my faltering English. Our headmistress, Hirandi, was appalled, and in consternation exclaimed, 'What have you done, Bina! The book is proscribed. They will surely cancel your first paper!' Her prediction was not totally correct. But later when I got my marksheet I found that the grade of my first paper was much lower than that of the second. Hirandi was disappointed and remarked, 'This is the result of the essay you wrote.'

Later in college I found a big library at my disposal. I started reading books on history and important English novels. Besides these, friends would bring books from other libraries, like *An Exile's Autobiography*, *Tales from Prison*, *Revolution in Bengal* and so on.

We would read these books sitting in secluded corners of the college building. As we read, we thought, 'Why can't we live such lives!'

At this time Subhasbabu and the others were released from prison. In 1928, the Simon Commission arrived and was being boycotted by the nationalists. We organised a students' strike at Bethune School and College. We approached the students and put up posters. The strike was totally successful, which was the first time in a government school and college. The principal warned the boarders that they would have to leave the hostel if they did not apologise for their insubordination. Some of the students left the hostel and went home. But others who lived far from the city did not know what to do. They asked for our advice while college remained closed. We were in a dilemma and spent hours discussing the issue.

Father, seeing our state, sent for Subhasbabu. When he arrived we ran to him for his guidance. He was amused at our excitement and jokingly suggested, 'Why don't you leave your college?'

We quipped in return, 'We will leave college immediately if you agree to teach us.' He said with a smile, 'So you want us to give up jail life and become teachers?'

Of course, finally we did not have to leave college. Instead our principal accepted defeat. Students did not apologise and classes went on as usual. The principal resigned from service and went away. Before leaving she bid us farewell with tears in her eyes. She sat beside us on the grass and said, 'No, I don't want a chair. I am no longer your principal.'

We had never been close to this strongwilled overbearing English woman. But at the moment of her departure our hearts turned heavy. Our victory was acclaimed by all the students. At a huge congregation at Albert Hall, we and the students of Presidency College, where a similar incident had taken place, were felicitated. Sarala Devi Chowdhurani said in her address to us, 'My place today is by the side of the students. I am proud to have been a student of Bethune College.'

From this time the students' movement in Bengal started to take shape. All Bengal Students' Organisation that started at this time was the first succesful attempt at organising students. My sister and her friends were also trying to bring the girl students together under the Chatri-Sangha through which they could participate in different programmes.

One day Subhasbabu paid us a visit. My mother was delighted, and we spent quite some time with him in light conversation. Suddenly I asked him, 'How do you think our country will get freedom? Through violence or non-violence?'

Subhasbabu remained silent for a few moments, then he replied, 'You must want something madly before you can achieve it. Our nation must want freedom passionately. Then the question of violence or non-violence will not be important.' He avoided a direct answer, but I have never had a better answer than this from anyone else.

A short time later in December 1928 the Congress would be held in Calcutta. All of us enlisted as volunteers. Subhasbabu was our G.O.C. Latikadi (Latika Ghose) took charge of the girls' section. My sister and her friends became officers of different ranks.

Every morning a bus would come to take us. We would return home late at night, sometimes at twelve, sometimes at one. Our training was imparted mostly by men. Since the last twenty years I have watched many groups of volunteers; just the other day I saw a big rally on Netaji's birthday. Maybe it is my imagination, but none of them have surpassed the 1928 group of volunteers in discipline, dedication and sincerity. People were different in those days. There was such a glow of determination on the faces of the young men and women. I doubt if the soldiers in the battlefield are more serious. Sometimes we would get dejected for we had no weapons to fight with. We would say to each other, 'How wonderful it would be if we had real weapons. Just imagine, with Subhasbabu as our G.O.C., we would march as armed soldiers to fight a real battle against the British army!'

This romantic dream was fulfilled later when Netaji marched with his Azad Hind Bahini. But we were not there with them.

Often our relatives would ridicule our enthusiasm. 'Without a shield or a sword how do you propose to fight? Why doesn't your "Napoleon" ride a horse? Why was he leading the rally in a car?' These jokes get countered later when many of our 1928 Congress volunteers became brave leaders of the Chittagong Armoury raid.

One day when the Congress session was over, Suhasini, a girl from my class, took me aside and asked, 'Monu, do you want to spend all your time and energy on this kind of flimsy excitement? Don't you want to do something 'real'?' I asked, 'What do you mean by 'real'?'

'Well something that will really bring us freedom. You are wasting your time in childish games.'

Henceforth we started spending time in secret discussions after college hours, during free periods and also by missing classes. Soon I started absenting myself from college. Thus, I forgot everything else in the intoxication of 'real work'.

THREE

There is great curiosity about our work in the past. But most of the ideas are misconceptions and not exact. With changing times, the nature of work has also changed. From today's standpoint it is difficult to appreciate or understand our method of work. Those of us of the past, who are still present today, we who are living through two different life patterns, are best qualified to bring the message of the past to the present I feel I have a responsibility in this respect. I realised how our age has been misunderstood when the other day I watched the musical *Avyudoy* (Awakening). The play started with a line, 'Khama koro jodi hinshar bodole protihinsha jaage mone.' (Forgive us if we retaliate with a blow for a blow.) This line was a complete misinterpretation of the spirit of our age. One retaliates in momentary anger, in an act of aimless personal vendetta; it only expresses destruction and hatred. The blood-stained history of that age of fire was of deeper and greater significance. Firstly and mainly, the youth of the country were at that time passionately aroused by the desire for freedom. From their schooldays they were inspired by the patriotic tales of other nations, tales of self-sacrifice for the freedom of one's motherland. To these were added poems by Rangalal, Rabindranath and Nazrul. Their songs turned their blood into fire. They thirsted for liberty; and intense desire to recover their

lost freedom at the cost of all that was precious swayed their minds and turned them from all petty ambitions.

Then as they grew older they learned about the evils of subjection; they studied how skilfully the British were despoiling our land. They realised how the foreign rulers were forcing our people to a subhuman existence of want, of poverty, of ignorance, and above all, of fear. No one had the courage to protest, or bring about a change. They saw with their own eyes how forty crore Indians turned into cowards. They read about how the Indian troops were sent abroad to suppress the uprising in China; they heard about Indian soldiers shooting down their countrymen in Jallianwala Bagh. The British rulers were wasting food on their pets, while our countrymen writhed in hunger. Foreigners, with the ruler's baton in their hands, were robbing the nation of its life force, all its material, wealth, all their possesions, while forty crore helpless men and women led spineless existence of pain and hunger. I was reminded of the words from *Pather Dabi*. 'Do not ever forgive them who are depriving our land of humanity.' Forgiveness was not the point. The question confronting us was how to free the nation from the curse of foreign domination. How were people, with no means at their disposal, to fight against the oppressor? How would they gather courage to stand up and face them on the spot?

From the darkness of despair, the youth of Bengal came forward with an answer. Armed with deadly weapons, with the fire of rebellion in their eyes, they emerged with death-defying arrogance. The wheels of the despot's chariot were arrested for the moment. 'Is this possible?' they thought. The downtrodden men and women of the nation looked up awestruck, 'Is this possible?' they wondered. It is true that British government did not collapse at this attack, but the tyrant became conscious of his tyranny. He was alerted as fear struck his heart.

Their attack was not against any individual. They knew it was not possible to defeat the British government by doing away with a couple of English officers. But they were their targets for they

were symbolic pillars on which the edifice of the British empire was erected. By striking them they struck at the empire.

The British bureaucrats were deluded into believing that black men were born to be oppressed and kicked around by the whites. This misconception was shattered when the rebel youths shot at them. On the other hand, the cowardly downtrodden nation threw off its torpor and stood upright with signs of hope on its face.

This was just what the rebels of those days wished to achieve. They knew that liberty was far away. They knew many more days of relentless hardships and dedication would pass before freedom from years of oppression could be achieved. No one knew better how weak and ineffective their weapons were against the might of the great empire. Those handful of young people knew they were trying to do the impossible. But they were also sure that their sacrifice would not be in vain. As they went to the gallows with a smile on their faces, they taught a cowering nation to stand erect and face death with courage. Men who had suffered abjectly without protest, learned to raise their voice. The spirit of rebellion would in the course of time spread from the few to the many in the towns and villages and rouse millions of our countrymen. They saw visions of the future; they imagined how glorious rallies like the Azad Hind Fauj would become true, how the uprisings of 1942 would shake the nation in the future. They were 'dreamers of dreams.' They were messengers of things to come.

This is not the time for historical analysis, nor do I claim to have the historian's impartiality and clarity of vision. Yet I believe that they who depreciate the 'age of fire' and consider it irrelevant in the chronicle of our national movement, and think of it only as a mad outburst of frenzied youth, lack historical insight.

I do not have the inanity to disregard Mahatmaji's contribution to the history of our freedom movement. Who can deny the importance of non-violence for our unarmed millions? But still I believe that our countrymen would not have been strong enough to use Mahatmaji's weapon of non-violence if they had not been roused from their deep slumber of turpitude by the acts of fury and self-sacrifice of the young

rebels from 1908 onwards. I do not have the audacity to argue with those who consider Gandhiji as the best leader of our nation. But the history of India's freedom struggle will not be complete with the mention of only Gandhiji's name and his programme of work. It must include the name of Bagha Jatin, it must give an account of the glorious Chittagong Armoury raid, and it must describe Netaji's march to Imphal. It must not forget Medinipur, Balurghat, Satara, Baliya, and the revolutionary governments that were set up there. It must also place on record the courageous stand of poor *mazdoors* and *kisans* as they confronted the policemen's bullets.

We realise how deeply the country was moved by the self-sacrifice of the young people when we find their names and stories repeated in the remote villages. Farmers gathering the harvest would sing,

Bidaye de ma phire aashi,
Chintey jodi na paaris ma
Dekhbi gaular phasi,
Borolatke maarbo boley
Marlem Bharatbashi.
Abhiramer dipantor aar Khudiramer phasi.
Phirey aashi.

(O mother let me go,
But I shall return, and you will
Know me by the noose round my neck.
Aimed at the Viceroy but shot a Bharatbashi.
Banishment of Abhiram and the hanging of Khudiram.
I shall return.)

The boys and girls of that age were cast in a different mould. Neither sorrow nor toil seemed to deter them. They were a rare example of consecration for a cause, rare anywhere in the world. They worked tirelessly for days on end without any rest, or pause; their eyes turned red with sleeplessness—but they still smiled with a strong resolute look on their faces. I remember a girl trudged for

miles from Ballygunge to Sealdah and back again for days on end and saved the fare for her party. They seemed to be totally unaware of the common emotions and desires of everyday life. Boys who were known to be brilliant as students threw their books in the dust, for where was the time for them to study hard and win gold medals? They were taken up by the battle of life. Again, there were boys from poverty-stricken families, where the family depended upon them for their survival, but heedless, the boys went on along the arduous path of struggle facing death at every moment.

In moments of agitation I would ask them, 'How will your parents survive if you leave?' 'Well,' they would reply, 'there are thousands of families like ours; how do they survive? Have you any idea how most of us feed our people? Today we cannot stop to think of our parents. We have to die so that a free nation may live.'

There were many boys and girls who were continually berated by their parents. The parents could not be blamed, for how can a family tolerate such indiscipline and defiance? So, the parents turned them out of their homes and they often went without food for long periods of time. Besides this they had to do the impossible task of keeping away from the policemen's eyes. I think, at that time every young person in Bengal had a spy on his tail. Thus, they worked, continually fighting against odds, until finally one day they were either picked up by the police and thrown into the hell of 'Ilysum Row', or they succumbed to a fatal end after a hazardous action. Countrymen marvelled at this heroic end of a martyr and hailed his parents. Their death did not go in vain. Everyone had a soft corner in their hearts for these dedicated souls. Their self-sacrifice stirred the people out of their daily mundane existence, and roused in them a spirit of protest. They looked up from their narrow self-centred

worlds and clamoured against the injustice that raged all over the country. The happy and content lost their sleep, and the misery of the sufferers increased. There was nationwide mourning for these young men.

Raja jaagi bhabe britha rajdhon,
Grihi bhabey micha tuccha ayojan,
Asru akaraney korey bisarjan, balika.
(The kingly turn away from their gold,
The laymen think lives are in vain,
The children wonder why
As they shed their tears.)

FOUR

My lifestyle changed as I entered the underground movement. I was told not to be ostentatiously patriotic, not to display my *khadi* clothes, or become noticeable in any way. As a result I withdrew myself from all activities. I transferred from Bethune College to Diocesan. I no longer participated in strikes, no one could find me at the forefront of rallies, nor was I interested in meetings or gatherings. Only now and then I would go out and return home tired and exhausted. On the first occasion when I went with Suhasini to meet an underground leader in secret, I had to lie to my parents. On the way Suhasini said, 'I was afraid I would not be able to take you. I had a secret pride in you.'

'What secret pride?' I wondered.

'Yes, I wanted you to come with us, but at the same time, I was always proud of your integrity, of your honest and truthful nature, how you could never tell a lie.'

I was lost in thought for a moment. It was not easy for me to deceive my parents. My sisters used tell me, 'You can never tell a lie for your face exposes the truth.'

But now I was helpless. I could not forsake these young freedom fighters who had staked their lives for their country, who were fighting for its liberation with every drop of their blood. I had to

stay with them. We were told to recruit workers and collect money for arms and ammunition, essential requisites for our battle against the British.

Acquisition of arms and weapons was not an easy task. So I turned my energy towards collecting money and recruiting workers.

I watched the students in class and tried to find out kindred spirits who might be interested in our work. I tried to get close to them and turned our conversation towards the problems of our country with hints about our programme. Some of them responded with interest, but there were others who avoided me when they realised my intent. The first rebuff I received was from an old friend of mine. She was my closest friend from school. We called each other 'Teardrop.' We shared most of our thoughts and ideas, and she seemed to have a great deal of respect for our activities. One day I took her to the Victoria Memorial to meet one of our leaders. On our way back, I asked her for her opinion. She replied, 'Very impressive. Almost like a stone idol.'

I realised the encounter had touched her romantic nature. But gradually, a change came over her. She grew distant and always appeared to be thoughtful and preoccupied. Finally one day she spoke out, 'Teardrop, I don't think I can work with you. I am not fit to walk such a difficult path.'

I was hurt when we parted ways, but I was sure she would find fulfilment in her own way. Echoing the poet's words, I wrote to her, 'May your Creator's will be fulfilled in your life. Let me withdraw in defeat.' We continued to be friends, but there seemed to be a barrier and I could no longer open my mind to her. She realised it and was saddened.

Among my comrades I especially respected Shanti Dasgupta. She was my senior in this work. Her nature was different from mine. She was outspoken and extremely intelligent. I always felt inferior to her for my excessively emotional and romantic nature and I wished to be more like her. Shanti and all her brothers and sisters were in the underground movement. Her sister Neena was younger than all of

us, but she was so high-spirited and courageous that we placed her at the forefront of all our ventures. She had in her the makings of a leader, but it all ended when she died an untimely death in jail from a fatal illness. She was only twenty-one.

Irene Khan was among the girls I wanted to bring into our fold. She was a second year student in Diocesan and was popular among the college girls for her simplicity and courage. The boarders often had to face challenges to prove their fearlessness and Irene was always a winner. I was sure she would be an invaluable addition to our group. I slowly approached her with my ideas. She heard my words with close attention and had many questions: 'Can you create good out of evil? Do you think war for freedom is evil? Is it wrong to fight for the end of this evil empire? But you are not fighting them openly. You are murdering them in secret.'

I said, 'You know it is not always possible to fight an open war, but that is not important. The fact is that we are powerless to fight an open war against the great military force of England. When the British rulers took away our arms, they not only weakened the nation by breaking its backbone, they also closed all doors for open struggle. So we have to fight them from behind covers and make preparations even more guardedly.'

Irene could not counter my arguments; rather, she was moved to tears as she listened. But the next day she came to me in college and said, 'Bina, maybe you will think I am a coward, but I just cannot make up my mind to join you. You know, last night I could not sleep; I was up praying for help.'

Irene did not come with us, but I still remember how I was impressed by her open and original mind. I was successful in bringing some new girls into our group. Some of them came from rich families and helped us generously with money. Others eagerly offered themselves instead.

I spent much time making plans for fund collection besides tapping rich friends. A friend advised me, 'You have a flair for writing; why don't you use it for earning money?' I went home and sat down

with pen and paper. Hesitantly, I sent my article under a pseudonym to the editor of *Bharatvarsha*. Next month we bought a copy of the magazine and there was my piece in print! It was in print alright, but where was the money? My friend and I conspired and sent another article with a very polite note to the editor asking for money for my work. The reply came, 'We make no payments for such articles.' Needless to add, the second article found no place in the magazine. Thus ended my effort to make money as a writer.

I remember another crazy plan I pushed at this time. I came across an advertisement in the paper for a salesgirl which involved selling lottery tickets. Between classes, I would go from house to house pushing tickets. My customers were surprised to see a college student in such an unusual role. I was not totally disappointed with this career. I got my commision from the sale of tickets, but the money was so minuscule that it covered neither my time nor my effort.

However, I continued to think of ways and means of earning money to help the party. I thought of a comparatively easier way to do that. I started tutoring young students, but the experience here was also bitter when I realised the disrespect with which private tutors are treated in most homes by exacting guardians.

Most of us in the party were driven by the same frenzy. We thought of our lives as totally consecrated to the cause of liberty. We had not a moment that we could call our own. We had nothing to ask for ourselves. There was not the least occasion for self-indulgence or relaxation or enjoyment in our lives. Painful toil brought us gratification. 'Do not ever forget that you are professional revolutionaries,' we were reminded all the time. We forgot all our youthful ambitions of success in examinations and golden dreams of future careers. We believed that the youth of the country had no right to happiness in their personal lives until the country rose out of its misery as a free nation. This was truly our conviction. The mantra 'Karenge ya marenge' (Do or die) inspired the boys and girls of Bengal long before it became a slogan in 1942.

During our youth, most of the students in college were attached to some revolutionary group or the other. Some were directly involved, and others helped while keeping a careful distance.

There was no dearth of revolutionary parties in those days—Jugantar, Anushilan, and Sreesangha were important groups; besides these there were quite a few small ones. At first I was in close contact with one such small group. Of course, then I did not realise if the organisation was big or small. Everything was shrouded in deep secrecy; no one could ask any questions. I never learned the names of the persons Suhasini took me to meet. One day while travelling in a bus, my eyes fell on an envelope that Suhasini was carrying. She removed it as soon as she saw me looking at it. For a moment I felt insulted, but I realised it was a part of the discipline we had to follow. I had no right to be curious.

We heard many inhuman stories of police torture—charging with batteries, forcing one to sit on ice, sticking pins into nails and many others. One had to be extremely strong willed to suffer these cruelties; also, it was necessary to have great physical control. I was reminded of the words from *Sign of the Cross*, 'It is my tongue that betrays my soul.' So, when revolutionaries succumbed to torture, it was not always a sign of cowardice of treachery. The excruciating methods applied by the Intelligence Branch officers often went way beyond human endurance.

We bow our heads to the memory of those who could bear such torments, but my heart goes out to those unfortunates who were defeated by inhuman physical suffering. They lived in lifelong misery, misunderstood by all, but ever remorseful for the pain they could not endure.

My sympathies are for those who broke down under police pressure. But there were others who betrayed their comrades for money or for self-interest. These were despicable creatures, and no words of condemnation are strong enough for them.

Learning from previous experience, two means were employed to save the group from such acts of treachery. First, every new recruit

was tested thoroughly before being inducted into the party. We were warned, 'We want quality, not quantity.' Second, details of party programme were known only to a very few members, while most of the others were kept in the dark. We were asked only to carry out specific orders. This had its advantages as well as disadvantages. We had no clear idea of our programme of work and much was left to our imagination. We easily believed that our party was the strongest in the country, but were often in strange predicaments when confronting emergencies.

The bomb attack on Charles Tegart, the police commisioner of Calcutta, had just taken place in Dalhousie Square. After a few days, I learned from Suhasini that many of our comrades were arrested, even Dada, our leader.

I was astounded. I had no idea we had any connection with the Dalhousie bomb incident. A greater surprise was waiting for us. In course of time we came to know that besides Dada we had no other responsible leader; and the few who were there wanted to keep away from action for the time being. There was much dissension in the party which surfaced every day.

As a result, the responsibility of leading the group fell on us. We came to know that many aluminum bomb shells were lying here and there with friends. We had to move them to safe places, and if that was not possible, we would have to destroy them. Police were on an all out search, and every moment the situation was becoming more and more dangerous. We found a notebook with code information. Luckily, we knew the code, so we could decipher the names of persons to get in touch with.

Gradually, our small group was overcome with depression and a feeling of hopelessness. This was mainly due to organisational confusion. Also, many responsible leaders were behind bars leaving us bewildered. Now we had to chart our own programme. So we pondered over our future course of action.

As we looked around, we found the dark sky over Bengal growing darker every day. On one side a handful of young boys and girls were

throwing deadly challenges, and on the other the enraged British lion retaliated in tempestuous frenzy. In blind fury they stamped across the country seeking revenge. The brave youngsters were not deterred by the ruler's anger. They confronted them with defiance.

The British government was invincible in its fighting strength, with its vast armoury and even vaster army of skilful I.B., S.B., police and military force. And the youth from Bengal? They were alone, helpless and unarmed. They were moving forward in dead secrecy without any help or sympathy from anyone.

Their countrymen feared to help them openly. Only a few of them had the courage to acknowledge their action in private. But they knew they had their place in the innermost hearts of the people. Their sacrifices were working to untie the knots of servitude and cowardice that were keeping the country in shackles.

On this battlefield, it was impossible for us to sit idle. We had been working for this and had waited so long for its fulfillment.

I approached a friend (not of our group) and coaxed her to give me a revolver. Within a short time, the university convocation was to take place. The Governor of Bengal would be present there. It would be a great occasion to register my protest against the empire.

There was no hesitation in my mind. Not for a moment did I think that the tiny instrument of death in my hands could be the cause of a person's death and consequently announcing the end of my existence. My mind had become totally impervious to all emotions. I was just a tiny part of a vast programme.

But I was doubtful about my success. I was aware of the humiliation of failure, and especially with my extra-sensitive nature, I dreaded it. Further, I had little experience with arms, and I had never handled a revolver. Only once had I gone out shooting with friends with a gun. My friends had shot at birds, but I had only aimed at a leaf on a tree. I hit the leaf, but at the same time, I received a tremendous backthrust. The revolver was such a tiny object that I was totally at a loss about how to handle it. I requested my friend to let me practise with it.

But there was no time and we could find no private place where I could practise. My friend assured me, 'It's alright, others have also used this without previous practise. I believe Benoy Bosu also had no time for practise.'

For the time being, I was assured. But little did I know then the difference between 'Bina Das' and 'Benoy Bosu'!

I had another reason for hesitation: my parents. I wondered how they would react; if they would be able to bear the enormity of my action. They were already puzzled at the change that had come over me after I had joined the underground movement. Unlike my previous enthusiastic self, I had become withdrawn and reserved. They could learn nothing from me about my daily work. So their disapproval was evident.

One evening I went out, telling them I was going to a friend's place. I returned late at night. My mother was waiting for me with worry written on her face. Father had gone to look for me at my friend's, where he learned that I had not been there. I had never seen my father so angry. In silence, I bore their chastisement, and all of us spent a sleepless night.

I told my friends that I could not live such a life of falsehood. But to them, it was daily fare. Within a couple of days, my father's anger was gone, and he took me in his arms and soothed my hurt. Chutudi had explained to my parents that I could do no wrong; rather, they were being unfair in doubting me. I had faced their anger stubbornly, but their tender words brought tears to my eyes. The façade was most difficult to bear with my parents. At times I felt like confiding in them. But friends exclaimed, 'Are you crazy? Never do such a thing. It will not only put you in trouble, it will endanger every one of us.'

But, on the final day, they did learn the truth. And even though they were in tremendous shock, they were still just as forgiving. They knew their daughter would do anything for her motherland. They knew she had done no wrong.

On the sixth of February, two days after convocation, my parents were brought to the I.B. office. I was shocked to see their appearance; the change that had come over them was unbelievable!

The I.B. officer requested my father, 'Ask her to tell us who gave her the revolver. We'll release her as soon as we learn that.'

I sternly rebuked them, 'You don't know my father. He will never ask me to be a traitor.' The officer did not persist. My father shed endless tears. My mother went from one to the other with the anxious request, 'Please look after my daughter. Please be kind to her. We love her so much.' Her love for me had made her a beggar.

I wrote this letter to my parents from prison:

Hurling a thunderbolt on our heaven-like abode,
Rocking the tiny nest with the rudest shock
With my work done
I stand here today.
But still I hear loving voices all around,
Father's warm embrace and Mother's tender heart
Calling their wayward daughter
To the safety of their bosom
Away from all the rigours of the road.
Do not call me. Let me lie here alone.
Holding on with my two weak hands
To my life's work,
My greatest glory, my greatest shame
You did not like my work
My motherland has turned her face
But, lo! On my futile life's work
Lies my creator's benediction.'

On the sixth of February, I was taken straightaway from the convocation hall to a room on the first floor of Lalbazar. My mind and body were overwhelmed with a feeling of utter listlessness. Some blankets were piled on one side. I spread one on the floor and covered myself with two others. Though these blankets were dirty and foul smelling,

having been used by many, yet, under their cover, I found home-like warmth, and I slept as if I had not slept for many days.

Waking up in the morning, I found two Anglo-Indian girls and an ayah from Lalbazar sharing the room. A group of sergeants had been merry-making the whole night long to the accompaniment of riotous music on the gramophone. They took turns to come in front of our door to see me, and waving their hands, consoled me, 'You tried to kill the Governor? It's the end of your life, no mistake about that. How sad! Poor child! She's so young!'

Smiling at their uncalled-for sympathies, I asked them, 'Where can I have a bath? Please help me.' They opened the door and the two Anglo-Indian girls accompanied me to the bathroom. I was not allowed to go in alone. Giving up the idea of a bath, I just washed my face and came out. A few minutes later, a Hindustani sub-inspector asked me if I wanted to eat. I told him anything would do. At lunchtime, he brought me a dish of rice, dal, vegetable curry, chutney, curd and a sliver of lime, all arranged with care. His sympathy was evident in his manner of serving, and as he left he whispered, 'It's not from the market. I have cooked it myself for you.'

So, altogether, my stay in the 'hell' of Lalbazar was not unbearable. On the fifth day of my six-day long term, they took me to the Presidency jail, where I found a large crowd in the female ward. Before I could make out the faces, a young girl from the crowd ran out and put her arms around me. She was Amita, a girl from our class. Gradually, I found numerous known faces amongst the unknown ones that stood around me. They were brought to jail for offering satyagraha. Amita introduced me to all of them, and then took me away, 'You badly need a bath before anything else. So come along.'

I found them enjoying their stay in jail, chatting with each other, singing loudly and playing all kinds of games. During visiting hours, people from home came visiting with food which we all shared. I remarked, 'You seem to be quite happy here. I never knew jail life was like this.'

They explained, 'There are too many of us now, so rules have been relaxed. The early comers had a bad time. They were kept in divsion three, and were forced to do hard labour, and had to wear short skirts.' My sister Chutudi was one of them. They were removed to Behrampur jail.

The next day at ten, I was to appear in court. My friends dressed me up in a *khadi sari*. Gujarati girls brought out their *kumkum* for me and made me wear their glass bangles. They fed me savouries from their store. I laughed and said, 'What is this? Are you sending me to my death today?' They cried out in protest, but in their hearts they were anxious about my future.

The trial was over in one day. In a statement, I placed my confession before my countrymen. Then I waited for the verdict; maybe the black curtain of death or dark years of banishment would take me away from my people.

When I returned to jail from court, the officers told me, 'You will be sent away from Calcutta soon. Don't worry. You will find two of your companions over there.' I knew they were referring to Shanti and Suniti, who had been arrested for the killing of Stephens, the magistrate of Comilla.

They were right. The next day, orders came for my transfer to Midnapur jail. Sadly, I wondered if I would get a chance to see my parents before my departure. During the trial, I had seen their faces in the distance. At the station, I looked all around, hoping to see them; maybe they had learned that I was leaving. Seeing my anxious face, a railway employee came to me and asked, 'Do you wish to send a message to someone?' He offered me paper and pencil and promised to deliver it.

I was overwhelmed with gratitude. In those days, it was a crime even to speak to us. I gave a short note for my parents to the gentleman.

FIVE

It was the same scene in Midnapur jail. Numerous women prisoners were crowding the premises, but with a difference. Most of the women here were from the villages. They had come carrying their children in their arms to participate in the national struggle. They bore on their bodies marks of injury inflicted on them by the police. These illiterate village women had accepted their lot with equanimity. They were simple village folk, shouting and squabbling all the time; but I respected them, for I realised how much more difficult it was for them to make this sacrifice than it was for me.

It was not hard for me to recognise Shanti and Suniti in this crowd. At first they kept away from me, but when I was going for my bath, they came near and said, 'Keep your clothes aside, we shall wash them with soap.'

'Why?' I asked. Shanti answered with a naughty smile, 'It seems from your looks that you are not adept at this kind of work.'

'Oh! And you think you are experts?' I quipped. They were in their teens, but they impressed one and all with their courage and self-confidence. There were invisible marks of victory on their foreheads, and the fire of rebellion in their eyes.

On the first day, they sang this song:

Cholé bandhu biheen ayka,
Moché rakté lalat kalanka-lekha;
Kapé mandiré bhairabi eki balidaan,
Jaagé nishanka Shankar tyajia sashean.

(Forges ahead, friendless and alone,
Wipes the mark of shame with blood;
The devotee trembles in the temple
As he offers himself,
And the lord of death rises
Fearless and bold.)

I still remember the electrifying thrill I felt on hearing this song.

The first few months I did not realise the meaning of jail life. My companions were either like my sisters or *boudi*; some were aunts and another my grandmother. They were solicitous about our welfare and always tried to protect the three of us from any trouble. The best food was kept aside for us, and our beds were laid out in the best part of the room. They would not let us make the least effort for ourselves. But such good fortune could not last forever. Some of the inmates were released and others were sent to Behrampur jail. They bid us farewell with tears in their eyes. Suniti tried to lighten the moment of parting with laughter, 'Look at them, Binadi! They're all crazy! Shedding tears for luckless ones like us!'

A more painful separation was awaiting us. Suddenly one morning the deputy jailor announced, 'Shanti Ghose is transferred to Dacca jail.' We were astounded. Why were they taking Shanti away from us? How long will they keep her away? Will they ever bring her back to our fold? We were so sure that the three of us would always be together. There was no one to answer our queries. In the jail, an order is an order. Controlling her tears until the last moment, Shanti said with a forced smile, 'Suniti, don't be sad.' Suniti replied with the same of courage, 'You too.'

The jihad of revenge of the jail authorities continued. A few days later, the same deputy jailor came again with another order, 'Suniti Choudhury has been transferred to division three.' We put up a strong protest. 'How can that be? You can't change divisions, and after such a long time?'

'What can we do? We have to follow orders. You can appeal to the government.'

They carried out their order. Leaving me in division two, they placed Suniti with the ordinary prisoners in division three. I again tried to plead with them, 'You could at least keep her as my companion in my cell.'

Their reply, 'We can give you another prisoner as companion, but Miss Choudhury will have to go. She cannot stay with you.'

Suniti's clothes were taken away and instead she was given a coarse, unfitting *kurta* and an extremely rough-spun *sari* to wear. We did not want to give up. We had scissors for our needlework duty. With that, we transformed the ugly *kurta* into a wearable blouse. In the evening the prison janitress came to us and said, 'The officers want to see the blouse.'

'How did they come to know about it?' we asked.

'That I don't know. You give me the blouse.'

Needless to add, the blouse never came back to us.

On the day of the file march, I asked the superintendent, 'We were only trying to make the blouse fit to wear. What was wrong with that?'

'Oh no! You had made it too fashionable.'

I wanted to ask him, 'Do you have designs for blouses drawn in your jailcode?' It was no use arguing with them. Following the jail routine for years, they had lost their sense of right and wrong. They were just a lifeless part of the British bureaucracy. There was nothing human about them.

We came against such useless rules every day. One summer, the heat was unbearable; so we asked our visiting physician for a palm leaf fan. He thought for a moment, and then agreed to send us one.

Next day when the superintendent came with his entourage to inspect our cells, he frowned, and with bloodshot eyes, exclaimed, 'What is this? Who has brought this fan here?' Our doctor muttered some excuse in a shamefaced manner, but soon the fan disappeared from our cell. What a commotion over a cheap palm leaf fan! Later, the doctor explained to us that the jailor was annoyed because there was no mention of a hand fan in the jail code.

Another summer evening, we had gathered some *belful* and *rajanigandha* from our prison garden and kept them in our cell. Later, when the jailor came to close the doors, he roared in anger, 'Why are there flowers in the cell? Throw them out immediately.' Then, turning to me he grunted, 'This is a prison cell, not a pleasure parlour.' I had never heard such a strange evaluation of flowers. For a long time after this, I could not look at *belful* and *rajanigandha* without recalling this incident.

Life in prison went on at a slow pace. Gradually, we became creatures of a world of our own—sans hope, spirit, joy and variety. Each morning we woke up with the thought, 'Why this morning? What shall I do with this golden dew drenched morning? When I have nothing to do, why does the singing bird wake me up? Why does the morning breeze whisper the call of the infinite?'

I do not want to wake up, but still I have to. I draw my unwilling body to the sewing machine with the burden of sewing napkins. Then the whole day I repeat the chore of sizing them, folding them, and sewing them on the machine. Our officers are not satisfied; they reprimand us, 'You are not doing enough. You must do more to earn your wages.' Then comes evening. Quickly we clean up and sit down for our meals. Washing our dishes, we have a few minutes of respite as we stroll along the courtyard. But it is soon over, for the janitress calls sweetly, 'Come on dears, now you must be locked up.'

Thus went our days, our evenings, our nights. Maybe things would have been easy if we lived only for ourselves. But that was not possible. We had to share the joys and sorrows of all the prisoners in jail. Over and over again, we decided that we would turn our backs

to the problems of other prisoners. Acts of wrong and injustice were being perpetrated all over the country. Have we been able to stop any of it? All our efforts have been in vain. We have not been able to dislodge a single brick of the edifice of oppression; instead, our lives have been shattered.

'Ami jey dekhechi protikarheenshoktér aparadhé
Bicharér baani neerabé nibhrité kandé
Aami jey dekhechi torun balak unmad hoyé chhutey
Kee jontronay morichey paathorey nishfal maatha kutey'

(I have seen Justice weep silently as she stands
Helpless before the abuse of power
I have seen young men raving in futile anger
As they stand face to face with death.)

But actually it was impossible for us to turn a deaf ear to everything. Could we silently watch the janitress kicking a sickly asthmatic prisoner? Twenty-year-old mother of Meher was running a temperature of 102°, but she was still pulled up and made to work at the grinding stone. No doubt jail life had made us hard, but not hard enough to let us watch all this quietly.

To all this was added a new problem. The jailor started abusing the prisoners in the female ward, taking advantage of their helplessness. When we complained to the superintendent he walked by silently. We told the magistrate when he came for inspection that it was impossible for us to watch such incidents. The magistrate waved aside our complaint and in halting Bengali told us to keep our eyes shut.

We realised that they were looking for trouble. Shanti had again come back to us. The three of us decided to go on a hunger strike. The other prisoners supported us, 'If you youngsters go without food, we shall also do so.'

We were excited. This would be something novel in jail life and maybe it will bring results quickly. But we were afraid that the jail

authorities would penalise the common prisoners for supporting us. So it was decided that they would refuse food on one day only as a token of protest.

Next day at lunchtime all the inmates of the female ward refused their food. There was commotion all over the jail. The officers came one by one to persuade us to break our fast. Luckily, a non-official visitor also came to see us and we explained the situation to him.

Everything went well on the first two days. But on the third day, we could not raise our heads, we had become so weak that we lay writhing on the floor, suffering from unbearable heat and hordes of pestering flies. We could not raise ourselves from the ground and had to crawl to the water container for a glass of water. The superintendent inspected us gravely. After a few moments I was called to the office. From there he took me in his car to a hospital outside the jail.

I left the jail and came out into the open just after one year. In spite of my hunger pains, I felt rejuvenated as the light and the fresh breeze of the outside world caressed my face. A Marathi nurse welcomed me at the hospital. Here the superintendent was a changed man. His behaviour was normal and he had a smile on his face. He said to the nurse 'Can you put some sense in her head? That is what she needs most of all.'

A little later he came to my bedside and said gently, 'I know you are angry with me. But what can I do? I understand your point, but I have to keep my subordinates satisfied.'

I realised that this was true English character. For them, 'prestige' was most important. They placed respectability before truth and the dignity of their institutions was more important than justice.

This was the source of their strength; also, this would turn out to be a flaw in their power and one day bring about its collapse. Unless they learned to distinguish right from wrong, all their sense of discipline, their love of honour, their strict standard of self-respect will not be able to save them. I did not argue with him. I just asked,

'What are you doing with the other two girls? They will die if you leave them there.'

The next morning they were also brought to the hospital. I do not remember how the next two days passed. After seven days, at around noon, all our family members came to the hospital. Our demand had been granted; the jailor would be removed from the jail. We would also be transferred to another jail. It would take some time and our bodies in their present state might not last another day, so they had assembled here with glasses of orange juice to make us break our fast.

After a long time, we found our dear ones around us. Jail visits were routine affairs under the vigilant eyes of the janitress and the officers. Here there were no regulations and controlling strictures. We talked freely for hours together about anything that came to our minds. Boudi sang to us and father offered a prayer. Mother dressed my hair in braids. Altogether, it was like a short beautiful dream, as if the whirlwind had playfully swept in a page from the past into our dreary present. They decided to keep us in the hospital for a few more days to allow our bodies to convalesce. This meant that for a few more days we would be free from the chains of prison. None but a prisoner can appreciate the pleasure of such a respite. We too had not realised how starved we had become for freedom. We realised how grim the stone walls of prison were only when they disappeared for a few days.

The mind of man is truly strange. How easily it is satisfied and how the slightest trifle can put it off. We led a kingly life in the hospital for a few days. All our desires were met. Every morning the newspaper arrived with no portion of it blacked out and no columns censored. Notundidi, a nurse, brought her gramophone for us. There was also a harmonium for our use and we sang at the top of our voices and no one came to stop us. Food was served to our order. Notundi brought her special savouries for us from her own kitchen.

In the male ward of the hospital, there were a few political prisoners. They were also heedful about our welfare and often sent us biscuits and other snacks. One day, they presented us with some

perfumed hair oil, soap and cream. These were luxuries we had not enjoyed for quite some time. As she annointed her hair with the sweet scented oil, Suniti cried out ecstatically, 'Oh the joys of sight, smell, and music....' After using the scented soap in our bath, we started to plaster ourselves with cream. Suniti advised, 'In a couple of days we'll be going back to jail, so let's finish this today!' We covered each other's arms, shoulders and backs with the sweet smelling substance.

Shanti, appearing from her bath, was shocked to see this sight. 'What are you doing with this cream on Binadi's back? Never heard of anyone using it in this way! What a shame! You have almost finished the bottle! I was planning to use this on Notundi's children.'

'But do you know how pleasant this is? Come on, we'll put some on your back.' Hilariously, we finished the bottle of cream in five minutes. There is no practice of taking certificates from prisoners, otherwise we could have supplied a wonderful advertisement for an unheard use of 'Meera Snow .'

Soon these happy days were over. We returned to jail. Shanti and I went to the Hijli women's prison and Suniti was sent to Dacca.

SIX

Through many such experiences, the stream of our captive days flowed on. We spent seven long years behind prison walls. Seven summers ... seven winters ... seven monsoons ... seven springs....

People exclaim in surprise, 'Seven years in jail?' As we look back, we also wonder how we survived seven years. But prison life was not a period of total loss. Today when I try to balance my life, I do not want to describe the seven prison-bound years as time wasted. My near and dear ones lament the loss of the best years of my life in the dark abyss of bondage. In a way this is true. But there is another side to it. First, we never bowed to the pressure of conflicts and chastisements of prison; we never succumbed to the pain of suffering. There was some secret source of strength in our hearts that sustained us through the difficult years. The fountainhead was our ideal. We did not think of ourselves as separate units. We knew that this chapter of our life, with all its good and bad, with all its gain and loss, was a part of history, the history of a nation fighting the battle for freedom. There lay our deepest consolation, our most profound sense of fulfilment.

I often wondered what I could have done with myself if I had not come to jail. Maybe I would have completed my Masters in Arts successfully. Maybe, I would have acquired a scholarship and gone

abroad for higher studies, and returning home, would have found a high-salaried job. But walking along this normal path of life, with the prize of success in my hands, bowing to the plaudits of admirers, would that have satisfied my innermost yearnings, my deepest desires? Would not the thorn of conscience have kept gnawing at my heartstrings forever? Is not this a hundred times better? This, finding a place for myself forever by the side of soldiers fighting for the freedom of their motherland? And, through suffering to seek atonement for the country's accumulated sins?

Many questioned us, 'Was all this painstaking effort worthwhile?' We replied, 'We don't know about that, but remember Byron's lines, 'It is something to feel a patriot's shame.' We often wondered what we would do with ourselves when we would be released. Kalpana quoted Rabindranath:

'Punarbar tulia laitey hobé kortobeyr bhaar.
Jey pothé chalitechinu aabar shey pothé jeté hobé.'

(Again shall we shoulder the burden of trust,
And walk along the path of yore.)

Prison life has its compensations, too. There is no better place to help a person turn inwards. Meditation and imagination, memories and dreams, criticism and self-analysis, there is little opportunity for these in a man's busy life. But these are the bare essentials of a prisoner's time. As a natural consequence, a captive's mind finds depths of thought, and unknowingly, life for him becomes meaningful. As the outside world grows distant, a man in bondage has to fall back on his own resources to satisfy his emotional needs, and in most cases, his mind does not fail him. The mind has secret corners filled with nectars of sustenance and unknown sources of exaltation, which unfold to us in the darkness of prison cells and which otherwise remain unperceived in the bustle of outer life.

This is again the best place to understand human nature. In the narrow confines and limited surrounding, a man is thoroughly ex-

posed. There we come too close to each other; the covers of formality are torn asunder and we can see each other through and through. This situation is not always beneficial or good. It often forces us to lose respect for each other. A friend once commented, 'If you truly love someone, never stay in jail with him.' On this point, I wish to disagree. I want to accept a person with all his traits, both good and bad. I want to respect him as a complete man.

Not only are there problems in dealing with others, the problem becomes greater when we have to face ourselves. In jail, we have to face the ultimate test of knowing oneself. It is human nature to hold an exalted opinion of oneself. Most of our virtues are created by our imagination. But in prison, there is no place for such fanciful dreams. There it is just as difficult to cheat ourselves as it is to cheat others. All our weaknesses are exposed and we learn to accept ourselves as we truly are.

So when we came out of prison, we were not the same persons as when we had entered. Not only were we scorched by the fire of suffering, or hardened on the grindstone of the prison walls, but we had undergone a great change of character by the turbulent encounter with ourselves.

Three years in the Hijli jail was a different experience. Rules were less stringent there. Besides, the company of other political prisoners was also a great attraction. We had been just the three of us for a long time and we were turning into awkward, odd creatures. The springs of our intelligence were revived as we came in touch with so many lively, bright minds. I devoted myself wholeheartedly to my studies. I had a regular supply of books from home. Almost all the books from my brother's well-kept library were tarnished by prison stamps and multifarious signatures of officers. In Midnapur, we had to put in hours of labour at the sewing machine, so we had little time for reading books. There, we could not keep more than five books at a time, the dictionary included. We often had disputes over this. There were no such rules in Hijli. Here we had a plentiful supply of books—books from home, books purchased by detenues and books

borrowed regularly from the Imperial Library in Calcutta. Finding myself in the midst of so many books, my starved mind was roused to great excitement. I buried myself in books for days together.

One evening, returning to my room, I found Shanti sitting there, looking exhausted. I asked what was wrong. 'Nothing,' she replied. 'I was trying to compete with you in reading books. But I have had enough of it.'

Besides reading, we introduced many kinds of games and competitions, musical and theatrical programmes, and debates and discussions to brighten our lives. We transformed Hijli into mini-Santiniketan, and organised functions like Barsha Mangal, Rabindra Jayanti and Bijoya Sammilan.

But soon we grew tired and slowly clouds of depression overshadowed our minds. Too much comfort became wearisome for us. We were bored with each other and were at a loss for words and topics of conversation. 'Our treasuries of memory were exhausted and we found nothing there to give us joy.' We wished to cling to our beds, for the outer world did not attract us anymore. This was surprising, as for long we had been so contentious about a few more minutes out of our cells. We stayed inside even when the cell doors were opened. We wrote on the prison walls, 'Tired we are, tired even of the sunlight.' The plight of the detenues was worse than ours. We knew how long we had to stay in prison, but for them everything was uncertain. Every moment they were expecting to be released. The government, with its 'go slow' policy, was releasing them one by one at long intervals. It was almost like that fable about birds where birds are caught in a hunter's net that has a hole in it, through which the birds fly out one by one.

We were growing impatient. Amongst us, Kalpana and Suniti were the most optimistic. Kalpana would keep trying to convince me, 'I'm sure none of us will be here for more than five years.'

Kalpana's conviction was for twenty years, and hearing her I would smile and say, 'How will you manage to get out?'

'I'm sure something will happen. You just wait and see.'

Finally, something did start happening, as Kalpana had predicted. We found signs of change in the papers. Mahatmaji was pleading for the release of political prisoners. At that time, Ujjal and I were in Dinajpur jail. Suddenly, we were ordered to go to Calcutta, but no one would tell us why.

We soon found out that Gandhiji was meeting the political prisoners in Alipur central jail. We were worried about facing him, for we feared that he was not pleased with us. We were worried about answering his questions. But we were also extremely excited about meeting this great leader whom we revered from afar. The day after reaching Calcutta, we were having tea when the janitress called out in her high-pitched voice, 'Oh Binadi, oh Binadidi! Come down quickly! Gandhi is here!' We were surprised to find Gandhiji arriving unannounced, without any fanfare, without slogan-shouting or thousands marking his route. He had come so quietly to meet us. We were thrilled but also felt how inadequate our welcome was. Swiftly we came down the stairs and found the jail office cleared of all furniture, the room cleaned, and a cover spread out on the floor. There sat Gandhiji and another noble-looking gentleman. Before we could touch his feet for his blessings, he joined his palms and bowed with a smile on his face. He called us by his side and introduced us to Mahadev Desai. Then, gently, he started questioning us about what we were thinking, what plans we had for the future, whether we thought our path of action was wrong or not and many such queries. Briefly we tried to give him our views. We said, 'It is difficult for us to make our plan of action now. We shall have to study the changes outside before we can decide. To us, the question of violence or non-violence has always been one of suitability. It has never been a religion with us as it is with you. Our choice will depend on the needs of the country.'

We were afraid he would be annoyed. Instead, a soft smile lit up his face and he assured us, 'I am glad you have been frank with me.

This is not the time for argument. You come outside, then we shall meet again and discuss.'

Mahadev Desai said, 'That is better; after your release, you try to change Gandhiji's views and he will try to change yours.'

We laughed and said, 'We do not hope to change Gandhiji's opinion. Mahatmaji, do you hope to change ours?'

Gandhiji smiled as he replied, 'Don't you know, I never give up hope.'

They left in a little while. In the evening, the matron came and gave us an account of the visit. It was an unforeseen sight in the jail office. As soon as Gandhiji entered, everyone, even the superintendent, stood up to welcome him. No one spoke. There was total silence in the room. We tried to imagine the scene. The jail office, as we knew it, was always jangling with heartless noise and meaningless activity. We were surprised to find so much reverence, awe and silence there.

We were released from prison just a year after our meeting with Gandhiji.

SEVEN

There is a description of a rotating gateway in Vicki Baum's novel *Grand Hotel.* Men who entered through it in the morning would not be the same as those who came out the next morning. Overnight unimaginable changes would come over their lives, which would wrought a total transformation of their personalities. Our stay was much longer than a night, but I was still reminded of it whenever I looked at the prison gate. One by one captives would enter the confines of the prison walls through these portals, and make their exit through the same way. But are they really the same people? Have not their lives undergone a total metamorphosis? Have they not been transformed completely, outwardly and inwardly, in body and mind? Their near and dear ones who one day bid them farewell with tears, will they be welcoming back the same person? Comrades who gave them a hero's send off, will they recognise them when they return shorn of their glamour?

At the time of our entry into prison, we had one thing in common, in spite of all our differences—we were all rich in physical health. But at the time of departure, that was one treasure we had all forfeited. At times we thought the jail authorities wanted us to suffer ailments. They waited for them to worsen and then they would release us. They did not want to bear the onus of prisoners dying

in captivity, yet they were assured of their imminent deaths. But we welcomed this, for then death would come under the free sky and in the midst of one's family.

Young girls entered the prison bursting with an abundance of health and energy, their faces glowing with intelligence. But the same girls left after years of incarceration, some borne on stretchers, others tottering weakly holding on to the jail guards.

Some breathed their last in the outside world, others lived on with the burden of their crippled bodies. They had left behind all their youthful hopes and joys and desires in the prison cells. Besides loss of health, so many other things happened during our prison tenure to totally upset our lives. Some heard of their mother's death, others learned how their young companion, a favourite young brother or a loving sister, had passed away. There was one amongst us older than all of us. She impressed us with her strength of mind and sternness of demeanour. When she heard of her mother's death, she broke down completely. With tears running down her face, she mourned like a child, 'Mother, I never paid heed to any of your words. Is that why you have left me?' Her tears moved us more than the tears of ordinary persons.

Over and above the curses of death and disease, we had other fears which kept our thoughts of liberation from being an unadulterated joy. We were apprehensive about the circumstances outside. In the free world, life had moved on, and we were afraid that we were left behind. Would we be able to adjust to the changes there? We had become used to the sorrowful and depressing world of the prison cell and were hesitant to leave it.

We were like birds in a cage, diffident about soaring into the boundless sky. But finally we conquered our fears. The Creator's clarion call brought us out into the bright world of freedom. The path of duty called us to action. We were reminded of the unfinished task left by dead fellow workers. The call came for us to raise the fallen flag and move 'Onward! Over the graves of your comrades!'

I found an easy link with the outside world through my family. Death had not touched my dear ones. My home was still an abode of joy and love and peace; the only remaining gap was filled with my return. The faces of my parents glowed with joy, and life moved on at its usual, normal pace. It seemed as if it had always been like this, and the last few years were just a bad dream. Mother wanted to know every little detail of my days in jail—what did I eat? What was the food like? How much milk did they give us? Why have I lost so much of my hair? Was the oil no good? Father did not want to hear anything about my stay in prison; he wanted to forget about it.

There were many changes at the homefront. Little ones had grown up and were married, and more little ones had arrived. My youngest brother, who was just my playmate when I had left, had matured into a thoughtful, intelligent youth, who now wanted to be my friend and claimed to share my ideals.

One day, father and I were sitting on the veranda talking when a cluster of bright young girls in colourful *saris* and frocks came up to us eagerly. I was wondering who they were when they introduced themselves, 'Chhotomashi, don't you know us?' I knew them at once by their address, but how was I to know that the tiny toddlers I had left behind had blossomed into such bright young ladies! Father said, 'You should have guessed.' I agreed, but with a secret sigh I longed for the little ones I had left behind.

After some time, I started looking around for my old friends. At first it was difficult to make contacts. Shanti (Dasgupta) was away in England. When she returned, I found her smarter and brighter than before. I enjoyed her company and talked about many things. Before leaving, she told me she was no longer interested in politics and would devote her time to teaching. Her words shocked me, for I remembered how in college, everyone expected her to be a valuable political worker someday. Why had she changed? I wanted to know how her mind was working. The same strange thing had happened with Suhasini, who had totally detached herself from politics. Stranger still was the fact that when all political workers were being rounded

up by the police, she was somehow left out. I think it would have been better for her if she had been arrested. Maybe then she would not have lost faith in politics. She was happily married, but somehow domestic duties did not seem to be enough for her energies. She could have done a lot for her country, for she had the qualities of a worker in her. I remember those days when she was bursting with enthusiasm and we would turn to her for inspiration.

I got to hear about another friend, who was my namesake. We went to school together, and she later dropped out from college because of ill health. She never joined our work, but she was always sympathetic towards our programme, and was ever concerned about my well being. She often came to Father to make enquiries about me. She died three months before my release.

I learned about Runu who, after her father's sudden and untimely demise, had become responsible for the welfare of her family. She was earning to bring up her brothers and sisters. She had given her mother peace of mind. I had always respected Runu for her reserved, sedate nature and her steadfast sense of responsibility. She wrote to me, 'I do not know how long my life will be like this. I have nothing to complain, for it is my own choice. But I hope one day to stand by your side when my brothers and sisters grow up.'

Finally, 'teardrops' came to see me. I had been saddened by the delay in her coming, but when she arrived, she filled me with happiness. She was still her old self, full of charm and tenderness. Burdens of family life had not changed her. She always had a soft spot for me in her heart.

There was yet another important task left for me. I had lost a friend and a comrade on the wayside and I wanted to meet her mother. I did not know how to face her. Neena came to jail a few days after I did. She was bursting with vigour and joyful enthusiasm. She was extraordinary in her capacity to spread joy all around her. Whenever Neena was by my side, the jail became a happy place. But within a year, her health suffered. She was a detenue and could have applied for home internment, but she refused to leave me. She finally

went home, but then her condition had become so bad that she did not survive, and no ties of love could keep her anymore. I felt guilty for her death.

Finally, when I went to meet her mother, she took me in her arms and on her shoulders I shed tears of sorrow. She asked me to, 'Come again, for I will find my lost Neena in you.' I also felt the same. Neena's death had come as a terrible shock. Now the pain was gone and only the memory of her joyful presence remained and became a part of my existence.

EIGHT

Soon, the excitement of our newly won freedom wore off, and then the problem was to decide what to do with our time. Once or twice Father gently suggested, 'What about completing your Masters?'

This was Father's soft corner. I knew he was very ambitious about my future. Whenever he came across a good book, he would bring it for me. He had been tutoring me since my early childhood. Even after this shock, he was still hopeful. But I did not want to continue with my studies there. My relationship with the University had become warped and I did not wish to enroll myself as a student there anymore. I felt that would be an anti-climax, a pathos.

Some of my near ones wanted me to go abroad. They made some effort in this regard too. At this time, I received a letter from a most unexpected source. C.F. Andrews, a noblehearted friend of India, had learned of my release and wished to know how I was, what I was doing and if I wanted to go abroad for higher studies. His tender concern for me touched my heart. Later, I heard from Father that after learning that the government was thinking of sending me to the Andaman prison, they had appealed to a lot of people to save me. I was through the efforts of Rabindranath and C.F. Andrews that the government stopped sending women prisoners to Andaman.

I sent him a reply, 'I would like to go abroad if I get a chance. It would be a great honour for me to receive your help.' I did not get a chance, for this was in April of 1939, and soon after in September, the Second World War broke out.

At this time, when I had no definite plans, it was felt that I should do something to regain my broken health. One of my older sisters was holidaying in the hills of Mussourie and invited me to join her. I readily accepted her invitation.

I had entered a completely different world. My sister, after all, was my sister and I had no problem with her. But the other people who lived in the same hotel with us appeared to be from another planet. I had never been acquainted with this sort of life. From afar, I had scorned them, ridiculed them and never had any respect for them. But when I came close to them, my experience was even more appalling. I had not realised before how dreadful the cultural conquest could be. The sham imitation in their lifestyle reminded me all the time of the humiliation of an oppressed nation. These people imitated our foreign rulers in every detail. They were ashamed to be Indian and shunned everything that would make them appear to be one. Everything about them appeared hideous to me; their clothes, their games and their hypocritical, holier-than-thou attitude. I was told that those who had European wives would proudly take them to the European club and wait outside for them as Indians were not allowed to enter. What an example of gallant chivalry!

It was strange that these people were the highly educated elite of the nation. With their education and money, they occupied the topmost rungs of aristocracy. They had the opportunity and capacity to do so much, but most of them led a superficial existence of parties and dinners and dances. They had no time for the outside world in their limited circle. Uneducated, uncultured creatures! Who cared if they lived or died!

They were not bothered about the future; the present was enough for them. They never thought of change, nor did they ever hope for

any. They could not imagine that one day, the centuries old British empire would wither away. For them, the British would last forever with their civil service and judiciary and stock exchange.

They did not think about the relentless movement of history. Only the poverty-stricken masses had time for such theories. A few irresponsible young boys and girls had started indulging in the study of these ideas and were creating havoc all around. Needless to add, I was a total stranger in their midst. They could not dream that the shy young girl in the corner, struggling with her knives and forks and at times riding with them on horseback, was just a few days ago an honoured guest in a British prison! Only a few days ago, they had read about her in the papers and were clamorous with criticism. I wondered how they would react if they suddenly came to know about me. They would immediately turn me out, or would themselves run out of the hotel. Poor creatures! I pitied them. All their wealth and position was based on the charity of the British, so they were always fearful of losing it. The young boys, Shibu, Nilmoni, Chinu were all mini-sahibs. Amongst them, I liked Kamal, for his fake 'sahibiana' was not so marked. He seemed to have substance beneath his apparent made up façade, some feelings and capacity for thinking. At times he came to my room, toyed with my books, and remarked, 'Life is so boring! I am already fed up.'

I wanted to draw him out of his surroundings. But would that be possible? For wasn't his future already chalked our? Next year he will graduate, then go abroad to qualify for the I.C.S. or the Bar. After a year, I heard something more about him. He was having an affair with a girl, but just when the marriage was fixed, he broke it off. He told his friends, 'She was clinging on to me like a leech!' So Kamal had changed, and in such a short time.

But his was one side of the picture of Mussourie, contemptible pettiness at the foot of the everlasting snow-clad Himalayas. But the peaks that touched the heavens shone in an ever-changing panorama of beauty and glory. I took every opportunity of escaping into the solitude of nature, where frozen waves of mountainous heights

encompass the green verdure of the earth. Frollicking clouds rolled by and the sky loomed tenderly above everything. The blue firmament appeared so close, I could almost grasp it in my arms.

The soothing environment of the hills, as also the loving care of my sister, helped me to recoup both physically and mentally. I returned in a much improved condition. But it was not for long. I was soon drawn into the web of politics, which caught me in its tentacles like an octopus.

NINE

But politics in 1940 was not the same as it was in 1932. The country had undergone complete change. The common masses were imbued with the desire for freedom. All around, *kisan* movements and *mazdoor* movements were being organised. Rallies bearing red flags could often be seen on the streets. The influence of the Communist Party over the youth of the country was strongly evident. The revolutionary mind was attracted by the new ideal, a picture of a new social system.

Besides, the Communist Party had an international status, being a member of the Third International, which added to their attraction. But for that very reason, many people were against the Party. The Party's connection with Soviet Russia was through the Communist Party of Great Britain. There was no difference of opinion about a mass upsurge, but some of us were apprehensive about turning for guidance from across the seas. The country had its problems which could only be solved by a totally indigenous leadership. There was suspicion in the minds of many that the Communist Party of India was being guided in every little detail by a foreign party. This suspicion was proved to be true when in 1941, the Communist Party suddenly changed its attitude towards the War. At the beginning of the War, they were eager to start a national movement. They

criticised the Congress for its hesitant attitude. At that time, they did not appear to be intimidated by the emergence of fascism. They had no change in their policy when Germany attacked Russia. But finally, when the Polit Bureau of the British Communist Party declared its policy in a long statement, a dreadful fear of Germany and Japan enshrouded the Indian Communist Party. Overnight, the 'Imperialist War' became a 'People's War.'

As I was saying, many people at that time started to think of adopting the communist ideology by joining the Communist Party, of planting the communist creed in the Indian soil. Lenin had adapted the Marxian principle to suit the needs of Russian society. Indian leaders faced the same responsibility, but a sheer imitation of the Russian party would not solve the problem. Marxism must be re-established according to the needs of the country. 'Marxism is not a dead dogma. It is an ever-evolving principle.'

At this time, Manabendra Roy played an important role and gave a new direction; later he changed his views drastically. He said, 'This is the time for snatching power. Now we must be careful that the power goes to the people. In Russia, the slogan was 'All power to the Soviets'. In place of the Soviets, we have a people's organisation, the Primary Congress in the villages. Our slogan should be 'Activise the Primary Congress Committees'.

This analysis brought many to the Congress fold. Today, I think that if we had taken up the stand in right earnest, and if workers had scattered through the villages strengthening the Congress, then maybe the picture would have been different today. The position of communalism may not have been so bitter, and maybe at the time of transfer of power, millions of villagers would have played a more active role instead of being mute watchers as they are today. It is useless to think of bygones. We are suffering the consequences of our mistakes. Who knows how many generations will suffer for the same. Not only for M.N. Roy, but for many other reasons, the Congress gradually showed signs of becoming a people's organisation.

In 1934, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru spoke of the inclusion of socialism for the first time at an open session of the Congress. Gradually this idea was brought out in all the resolutions and speeches of leaders. Instead of forming a new party, we decided to accept the Congress as the most popular and the most powerful mass organisation and tried to transform it along socialist lines. And under the leadership of this Congress, we would try to rally the masses and thus establish freedom and bring about a socialist regime in that free nation. We hoped that if we could bring the masses behind the Congress, then fight for freedom as well as socialism could be fought at the same time; and when the nation became free, socialism would be established, if not simultaneously, then in the near future.

The main hindrance to our new programme was the internal conflict within the Congress in Bengal. The dissension had started from the time of Tripuri Congress. The Congress high command differed from Subhas Chandra on many issues. As a result, he was banned from the Congress for acts of indiscipline. Subhasbabu formed the Forward Block and the situation became more complicated. In spite of the ban, Subhasbabu and his followers refused to leave the Congress Committee. Consequently, the Congress Working Committee formed an ad-hoc committee and entrusted them with the task of forming new committees in Bengal.

The question now before Bengal was whether to continue as part of the Indian National Congress or to join the banned committee led by the most popular leader of Bengal. As I have said, we had accepted the Congress with much hope and confidence. It would be meaningless for us to work with a splintered provincial committee and we had doubts about it becoming a part of the Congress. Leaving aside issues of right and wrong, it was this point that made us decide to join the ad-hoc Congress Committee. For this we had to face strong public criticism. In those days, it was not easy for us to work for the Congress.

Personally, my task was more difficult because of my family's relationship with Subhas Chandra. At home, no one approved of

my decision to go against Subhasbabu's committee. At times I felt guilty, particularly when Subhasbabu was harshly criticised in our party's journal, *Forward*. Maybe in politics, harsh statements are necessary to establish one's viewpoint, but I wished they were milder in this case.

In the month of January in 1941, I met Subhasbabu for the last time. He was then confined to his home because of his illness. One day he sent a message that he wished to see me. I had not seen him since my release from jail, but I believe he had kept track of my political moves. So I was surprised when he sent for me. I went up to his room on the first floor of his house. He was lying in bed; maybe because of his unshaven beard, he appeared emaciated. I was meeting him after a long time; I almost could not recognise him.

Subhasbabu smiled at me and commented, 'You appear much thinner.' Then he wished to know what I was doing, what were my plans, etc. We conversed for almost an hour. We had arguments; he tried to justify his actions.

But we could not come to any conclusions. Did I expect an easy solution? Honestly, no, I did not expect a reconcilliation, but in my heart of hearts I had hoped for one without any reason whatsoever. I had to leave and he had other work to attend to. He smiled and said, 'Your visit has given me much happiness. It's been a long time.'

I replied, 'But we have been arguing all the time.'

Four or five days later, I read in the papers the news of Subhasbabu's sudden disappearance. I often wonder why he sent for me on that day. His plans for leaving the country must have been ready then. Did he want to give me some idea of his plans? Was he hoping for my cooperation in his venture? So many questions passed through my mind. All answers lie buried today in the silence of the great unknown.

TEN

'Mass work' is not as easy as it sounds. It requires special training, self-discipline and a specific spirit of dedication. It is because of this difficulty that all our political parties have failed to achieve contact with the masses, although theoretically they clamour for it all the time. It is due to this that we still find such an insurmountable distance between our people and the leaders. We do not understand the language of their suffering, nor do they find any meaning in our intellectual quibbling. Someone had once said that the difference between Hindus and Muslims or between the rich and the poor is not as important as the difference between the educated and the ignorant. If ever this gap is bridged, then the nation will be truly emancipated. This realisation came to us as we worked among the masses for the Congress.

However, we already had some idea of this kind of work from our days in prison. Truly, 'prison is a great leveller.' There one has to relinquish all of one's pride in status or vanity of culture. There we stand face to face with the basic emotions of life. There one finds little difference between the rich and the poor in the mortification and humiliation of jail life. To the convicts, a prison is 'a house of sorrow.' Truly so; and in the 'house of sorrow' we came close to the suffering masses. We were not there as reformers or teachers.

We were just one of them. We had spent days with them in easy companionship, sharing our joys and sorrows, our problems and worries. There was no constraint. Through this closeness, we not only came to know them, we also learned to respect them. Amongst them we found some who were so shrewd and intelligent that some amount of school and college education would have made them outstanding and able to lead. Their lives were star-crossed else why were they in jail? But they did not accept their fate silently; they had raised their voice against the tyranny of their home and society. They could have lived a straight life if life had given them a fair deal.

Outside prison, I came to know the working class in the rice mills of Tollygunge. The women workers there worked under terrible conditions. They toiled from early morning to evening, with only a short break for lunch, for a meagre pay of five annas per day. I came to them at an inopportune moment, for a few days ago they had been led into a strike which failed because their leader had betrayed them. They had a woman leader named Gulbahaar who had taken bribes from the authorities and had run away. After this, the workers had lost all faith in unions and strikes. They looked at me askance and wanted to know what my plans were. When I spoke of meetings, they walked away in disgust.

I realised that direct approach was not possible; so I just went about trying to be friendly with them. I visited them whenever I had some time. There lives were starkly unremarkable in pitiful poverty. I would find a mother braiding her daughter's hair with a bottle of oil by her side. Another would be placing a dish of rice and fish curry for her son's afternoon meal. In the evening when their day's work was done, they would relax in their courtyards, men with their *hookahs* and women stitching together old rags to make their children coverlets for the night, laughing and joking all the time. No one would have guessed that they had gone through daylong drudgery for a mere pittance of five annas, and that they often went without a proper meal. With no education, without any sense of

decorum, they struggled with poverty. But still, they had their own rules of propriety and social mores of right and wrong.

Ratanbala was one of the girls who extended a friendly welcome to me. She was smart, robust and more comely than the others. She told me everything about herself even before I could ask her. She had no parents, she lived with her aunt, she had just started work and the 'babus' had assured her that she would soon be promoted. It was quite a pleasure talking to her; she listened attentively and wanted to know more. I said, 'I can teach you, if you wish to learn.' She nodded eagerly and asked, 'When will you come again?' When I returned after three or four days, they surrounded me, 'Ratan isn't here. She has gone away.'

'Where has she gone?' I queried.

'We don't know. Don't you know?'

I was surprised. How was I to know? But from their faces it was evident that they did not believe me. I did not like their suspicious attitude, so I did not stay there long. When I went there the next time, they had forgotten about Ratan, and her aunt had also left the place. With their childlike minds, they did not dwell on anything for long. But I could not forget her. Though I had only seen her once, I still remember her for her smartness. I wonder where she disappeared. Many pictures, both good and bad, come to mind when I think of her.

There was another funny incident with Toru. Her mother told me, 'I am too old to learn. Why don't you teach my daughter instead.' I gladly agreed. Six-year-old Toru came to me with her books and filled her slate with the alphabet. She was very serious. Other naughty children would stand around watching us. I said, 'Toru, I am teaching you. Later, you will teach the others.' Wisely, she nodded assent.

But the next time I arrived, those children ran to me shouting, 'Do you know, Toru has got married!' I laughed at the joke! Six-year-old Toru with her childish prattle! It could not be true. When I entered their room, Toru came to me with a broad smile on her

face, in a red *sari* and lots of vermillion on her forehead. Hiding my smile, I chided her mother for breaking the law, the Sarda Act, which prohibited child marriage. Toru's mother pleaded, 'Oh Didi, do not say such things. Give your blessing to your Toru.' I gave up, for what can one do.

I do not think that the lives of poor people are totally bereft of joy. Father often said, 'All the time you lament about the sordid unhappy lives of the poor. But I think it is partly your imagination. We were poor villagers born in poverty.' In reply, I wish to take my father to the slums of Tollygunge. There the sight of children growing up like wild animals hurts me the most. Dressed in rags, with their bodies mired in dirt, totally lost to the world of letters, they spend their days completely uncared for. Children, seven or eight years old, learned to gamble and even younger boys were free smokers. What did the future hold for them? But they were born with all human potentials.

No one provided them any healthcare. I remember a young boy, hardly twelve years old, sitting by the doorside, anaemic and emaciated, continually shedding tears of pain. I was told that the doctor had found something wrong with his liver. 'Did the doctor give him some medicine?'

'Yes, but that was a long time age.... I'll have to take him again.' But I never found him going to a doctor. A homeopath doctor had promised to come with me to see the boy, but before my plans could materialise, the boy succumbed to his liver. The place he occupied by the doorside was empty. I sat there for a few moments and thought of the futile tears the boy had shed sitting here.

At times, the unfairness of life distracted me. The sin of man's injustice to man is the greatest sin, and the enormity of this sin in India alone should be enough to sink our Earth into eternal hell.

ELEVEN

Besides working with labourers, I found some opportunity for literary work through a monthly journal *Mandira*. *Mandira* was run by women with the intention of spreading political ideas through literature.

I felt elated at the idea of participating in literary work. From our early years, we were interested in creative writing. As little girls, my sisters and I brought out a handwritten magazine. Just to encourage me, my sisters made me the editor. All the contents of the magazine, stories, essays, poems and pictures were contributed by the members of our family. Mother and Father were always ready with their help. We had another sympathiser who honoured our little magazine with his loving help. He was Jogesh Chandra Roy, Father's friend and a well-known writer and critic from Bankura. He would encourage us by going through our writings, correcting them and advising us on editorial matters. Very seriously, I would argue with him on different issues. With love and patience he smiled at our childish presumptuousness. He always addressed me as 'editor,' an honorific I cherish to this day.

For the sake of *Mandira*, we had to meet the elite of the literary world. Some responded sympathetically, while others turned us down. There were others who thought our attempts audacious, for,

according to them, we were going beyond our bounds. They were right to some extent, for in the midst of the political turmoil of the time, we really did not have the peace of mind for true literary work. It is not easy to bring out a literary magazine. It requires much concentration as well as erudition. We were busy with so many other things. We were going from house to house trying to enlist new Congress members, rounding up people in empty parks for a Congress meeting, and travelling from district to district forming Congress women's sub-committees. Further, we were rushing through the offices of Clive Street and Dalhousie Square inviting advertisements for our *Mandira*. Over and above all this, most of us had to work for a living, some as teachers in schools shouting continually for hours, others labouring in houses as private tutors. Our condition was really pitiable in those days. As I look back, I feel sorry for us.

Such fruitless days have been rare in our lives. We did not grudge the effort we put from morning to night; but the end result was so disheartening, for most people turned their faces with insults and affronts. In those days, the 'ad-hoc' Congress was most unpopular in Bengal; no one wanted to hear anything about it.

We too had our faults, because of which we failed to organise. First, we had come out into the open after a long period. We had no contacts with the generation that had grown up and had little opportunity to come close to students of schools and colleges. The few young people we came across looked upon us as strange antiques! Inquisitively, they would ask us to tell them stories of our days. Unwillingly we would comply and relate our 'grandma's tales' for some time, but as we would start talking about our present work, they would disperse; they had other work, the music teacher would come or they had plans to go to the movies. Politically inclined students would shun us. In their opinion, the Congress was old-fashioned and dull, only fit for old people. In comparison, the Forward Bloc, the Communist Party, The Fourth International were so much more exciting. Then, 'leftist' and 'rightist' were the most popular words in politics. But most people were vague about leftism; according

to them, anything exciting, anything that roused the masses was 'leftism'.

We had other drawbacks. We were not adept at expressing our ideas clearly. From our early youth we had worked with secret underground groups, where we usually spoke in whispers. This was the age of mass organisation, where workers had to scatter sparks of inspiration through oratory and demagogic leadership. We attended mass meetings where we were impressed by the fiery, rousing speeches of leaders. We were charmed, but at the same time we felt depressed at our ineptitude, which was truly a disqualification. We felt depressed and thoughts of retirement came to our minds. We commented sadly,

'Moder sabha holo bhango
Akhon aasiachey notun loke
Dharay nobo nobo rongo.'

(Our time is now over,
Earth has now new faces in new robes.)

But it was not easy for us to retire from politics. Our lives had become entwined with the joys and sorrows of the teeming millions of our land. It would hurt if we tried to break off. It was our own necessity that would not let us leave, so we stayed on.

TWELVE

Of course, from time to time, there came opportunity for leisure. One of my elder sisters, who was living in Lahore, invited me to her place. We decided to visit Delhi, Agra and Jaipur on the way. Delhi had been the centre of kingdoms since ancient times. Seven regimes had risen and disappeared like bubbles in the stream of time. What a vast expanse lies between Indraprastha of Yudhishtira and Delhi of George V, wherein lie silent relics of ages and dynasties, and monuments of war and peace. As we stand on the precincts of Delhi, all our history lessons speak out to us. Scene after scene comes to life. We can almost hear the lamentations of Panchali, the sneering laughter of Dusashan and the neighing of Pandava's horses as they set out to conquer the world. We can clearly visualise the awesome figure of Kutub on horseback, Razia Begum enthroned in all her glory, the devout Emperor Akbar in deep meditation as he dreams of a new religion bridging the differences between Hinduism and Islam, the tragic picture of Shah Jahan looking pensively at the Taj Mahal from the marble towers where he lay captive. The vision of the royal court of Empress Nur Jehan and Emperor Jehangir at Diwan-e-Am comes to mind, where a few white traders from across the seas bow in supplication, seeking permission to just buy and sell in this foreign

land. Then scenes change in quick succession, too quick for one to note all the details. Finally, we come to the last scene.

The flames of the Sepoy Mutiny had blown out, but the roads of Delhi were still bloodstained. The royal court had a different look. At the centre of power now reigned foreigners from across the seas, and in front of them, stood the stooping figure of the last emperor, Bahadur Shah, the last ruler of independent India, with iron shackles on his hands and feet. In Bahadur Shah, we see the future of millions of our countrymen in years to come, when every Indian will spend their days in invisible chains. After our tour of old Delhi, our hosts wished to take us to New Delhi to visit the new Parliament, the government houses, the Connaught Circus and its environs. I refused, for I had had enough of it in Calcutta. I had seen enough of the false glow and glamour of the British Empire, and I did not wish to waste my time seeing it again in Delhi. I had come here to witness the glory and power, the scrumptuous extravagance of days gone by. I wanted to evaluate the past and analyse the reasons for our fall. I wished to find out the sources of our past strength and also the loopholes through which the poison of decay entered our body politic and brought about its dissolution. I went with them to the Qutab Minar, Jama Masjid, Humayun's library, Akbar's Fatehpur Sikri and Jahanara's tomb.

In Agra we just had time for a visit to the Taj Mahal. After lunch, we boarded a number of rickshaws and left for the Taj Mahal. It was three o'clock in the afternoon, and the sun's rays were blazing over the everlasting beauty of the Taj Mahal. The brightness of the glowing marble dazzled our eyes. For hours we stayed there, gazing at her beauty. We sat in the courtyard by the River Jamuna till nightfall in speechless wonder, all our exclamations silenced by the grandeur of the sight. Perfect beauty always has a secret source of sorrow at its core. Besides, the Taj was inspired by sadness, and it stands as an eternal testimony of an Emperor's love for his consort.

'Ek bindu nayanér jal
Kaaler kapol tale suvro samujjal
Ey Taj Mahal.

(A drop of tear
On the cheek of time
Pure and glowing,
is Taj Mahal)

We were then in the throes of sorrow, for our loving mother had left us for her eternal home a few months ago. I do not know why, but all the time when I was at the Taj Mahal, I felt my mother very close to me. On the banks of the Jamuna, as I laid my head on the cold marble, I felt my mother's touch as if she had come to comfort her motherless children.

Finally, we reached Lahore. The Punjab of Guru Govind Singh, of Bhagat Singh, of Lala Lajpat Rai, and of Jallianwala Bagh. My mind was filled with curiosity. The Punjabi, with his tall, well-built physique, fair complexion and good looks easily attracted one's attention. But that was all; beyond that I found very little to impress me. My sister was also of the same opinion. The Punjabis were much more anglicised than the Bengalis. Even students here usually wore European suits and spoke mostly in English. They were smart and active, but had hardly any interest in political activity.

I was impressed by a family I met in Lahore. Mr Bedi and his European wife lived in a cottage in Model Town near my sister's home. Though it was an earthern cottage, it was beautifully decorated with a vast collection of books. Mr Bedi was a journalist who wrote books on socialism, and his wife, Mrs Bedi, was a professor in a local girl's college. Their mud-built home attracted people by its novelty, and it was a truly sincere way of practising what you preach.

I loved the gardens of Lahore, with its profusion of luxurious Basrai roses. I liked the dry, clear atmosphere of the place and, last but not least, was the warm hospitality at my sister's home with a constant supply of delectable food. After a couple of months we returned to Calcutta.

THIRTEEN

Returning to Calcutta, I found the political atmosphere there in a state of confusion. One morning in December 1941, the newspapers spread the news from home to home of Japan's entry into the War. The War had come close to us, with bombers flying overhead and sirens wailing at intervals. The roads of Calcutta were marked with slit trenches, baffle walls and camouflaged cannons.

It was a strange experience for Bengalis who had never seen a war in their lives. Their basic nature was exposed when they started leaving the city in hordes. Of course, there was no reason for them to stay and face the enemy. People in England were fighting to save their country, to protect their freedom with all their might. But in our country, most of us were of the opinion that, as a dependent subject nation, it mattered little who was our ruler. Let them fight while we save ourselves from the bomb.

The urge to escape became stronger when they saw the plight of the Indian refugees from Burma. In thousands they were pouring into the cities, loaded in ships and boats or dragging their tired bodies over the mountains and forests on foot. They told tales of injustice and ill treatment meted out to them by the British rulers. All facilities were open for the white people while the black Indians were treated with inhuman indifference. 'White' roads and 'black'

roads were created, and the white masters left the country with all the money, their memsahibs and pet dogs along the 'white' road to India.

We were also busy at this time helping the evacuees. We brought them into the city, took care of their food and boarding and sent them to hospitals when necessary. The Bengal government followed the example of their Burmese counterpart. As a result, the responsibility of relief work fell on the Congress, the Marwari Relief Society and other non-governmental organisations.

Another incident that had caused much consternation was Germany's attack on Russia. Political experts had expected this, but the common people were shocked. Russia was the common man's land and it was trying to solve the common man's problems. The Indian populace had great sympathy for Russia, so they were terror-stricken when the Nazi wolves suddenly descended upon them. Would this be the end of the cherished Soviet Republic of Russia? We studied the progress of the War with great interest in the newspapers every day.

But our opinion about the War still remained the same. We had found no logical reason to change our attitude. From the beginning of the War, the Congress as well as most countrymen had held the view that they did not want fascism. They had no desire to go from British to Japanese control. When a country was oppressed, the only battle they could fight was against the oppressor. We were not ready to fight in this war as paid soldiers of the British army. So, if the people of Great Britain or even the whole world wanted the millions of India to participate in this anti-fascist war, they would first have to give us freedom. We should first have the right to protect our own land. No one could go against this legitimate demand of the Indians. The whole world was silently sympathetic to our cause. General Chiang-Kai Shek of China won our gratitude by openly supporting our stand. The Americans refrained from open commitments out of consideration for their ally, the British. But Louis Fisher, an

eminent American journalist, openly supported the Indian position in unequivocal terms.

But unfortunately, a discordant note was struck from inside the country. The Communist Party here confused the political atmosphere by raising slogans of 'People's War'. They would argue, 'We will turn this war into a people's war for India.' 'How will you do that?' we asked. 'By the pressure of public opinion,' was their reply. But the only expression of public pressure evident was slogan mongering students on the streets shouting, 'Ingrez maarkin haat dhorey cholo jai/Japani dosyur saathey koribo larai.' (Let us march with the British and American to fight the Japanese tyrant), or meetings clamouring for arms to the homeguards.

On the other hand, after the failure of the Cripps' mission, the political atmosphere of the country became more and more tense every day. Mahatmaji, through his articles in *Harijan,* was clearly sending out signals to the nation preparing them for an all-out uprising. Outside Bengal, leaders like Sardar Patel, Rajendra Prasad and others addressed the people in clear terms.

But there was no sign of action in Bengal, where everyone still remained spiritless and inert. There were many reasons for it. First, though Bengal had no programme of work, the British authorities, mindful of Bengal's political past, had rounded up all the political leaders of the country and put them behind bars. Subhasbabu and his followers were branded 'fifth columnists' and were the first to be thrown into prison. Other workers and organisers of the ad-hoc Congress group were also arrested. It certainly was a 'people's war'! The Bengal Congress, still preoccupied with their internal conflict, lay lifeless and weak.

At this time, another terrible blow fell upon the tottering nation. On the 7th of August, 1941, Rabindranath passed away. Rabindranath's death was a loss to the world, a shocking incident for the rest of India. But only the Bengalis realised how much he was a part of their very existence, how helpless they felt at his passing away. The nation was blinded, with no sign of light or hope or joy on the horizon.

In this moment of darkness, the clarion call of the August Revolution resounded through the country, and this call was raised by the common people of the nation. On the 8th of August 1942, the historical August Resolution was accepted by the All India Congress Committee, and immediately, all the national and regional leaders were put into prison. The revolutionary directives of the resolution reached the people, but the leaders did not get the opportunity to launch the movement. But the common people did not hesitate for a moment to follow the direction of the leaders. The Congress as an organisation was banned, but the Congress in the hearts of the people asserted itself and reverbérated throughout the length and breadth of the country. The Congress had never had such a moment of glory and success.

The incarcerated leaders of the nation had created innumerable leaders throughout the country—they worked in the villages and factories, and spread the fire of revolution across the land and tremors were felt through the foundation of the British empire. What greater success could the Congress ever hope to achieve?

A most desirable revolutionary condition was created so easily and naturally. Yet, numerous theoretical questions were raised. Who started the revolution? Congress leaders were not there to start it. Was it truly a struggle for freedom? Or was it a disruptive movement of anti-socials? Such questions were raised by the so-called supporters of the people's cause, as if leaders were never created by the necessity of the moment as the people struggled for freedom.

In Calcutta, we received news from Bombay, Bihar and the United Provinces, how the fire of revolution was spreading across the country. All the factories were closed in Ahmedabad. All over the country, rail lines were being uprooted, telegraph lines torn down and unarmed groups of people were taking control of police stations, where the armed police force was submitting without protest. But nothing was happening in Calcutta or Bengal. There was no inspiration, no excitement anywhere. Why was it so? Why this unnatural demoralisation? I remembered in 1939, at the time of the conflict between the All India Congress and the Bengal Congress,

Rajendra Prasad had commented, 'Then Bengal will be out of the picture.' His words were turning out to be true.

But we decided not to give up. We planned to start an action to rouse the Bengalis out of their slumber. A massive meeting was organised at Wellington Square where the August Resolution was read out and Mahatmaji's last command before his arrest, 'Do or Die,' was raised as a slogan. There was a large gathering at the meeting, and especially impressive was the procession of students from Jadavpur Engineering College, who walked seven or eight miles to attend the meeting. We felt encouraged. We feared, rather hoped for, police interference, for that would rouse the anger of the people. As nothing of that sort happened, the Congress workers decided to scatter through the districts and the industrial belt to seek people's participation in the movement. The newspapers offered no help, so leaflets had to be cyclostyled to spread the message. There was an attempt to organise in a methodical manner.

At this time, my fate took me along a different path. I was then the secretary of the South Calcutta Congress Committee. It was my responsibility to organise a mass meeting in South Calcutta in support of the August Resolution. Friends were afraid that I would be arrested at the meeting, but as the chief organiser, I could not stay away. I handed over my writswatch and other belongings to my brother and walked towards the meeting at Hazra Park. As we approached the Park, we found the entrance blocked with rows of machine guns. There was a police van at the gate, and as we drew near, we were picked up by the police and forced into the van. My companion, Amulyababu, raised his voice and roared, 'Do or Die! We have been stopped from speaking to you'.

There was a scattered crowd on the other side of the road. The police raised their batons and attacked Amulyababu and others. I tried to stop the policeman's baton from hurting my companions. Some people who saw me doing this feared that I would break my bones. But proving that a young Bengali girl's bones are stronger than the British sergeant's baton, I entered the familiar hold of the Presidency jail in one piece.

FOURTEEN

My first few days in jail were miserable. There was such a lot of excitement and new attempts were being made outside; and here, I had sought arrest just by attending a meeting. I should not have given so much importance to my responsibility as the secretary of South Calcutta Congress. It was meaningless to call a meeting at such a moment of crisis. I felt I should have proceeded differently. But still, how long can one go on blaming oneself? I calmed down, but there was no peace in my mind. All the odious memories of my last stay in prison came back to me. One period of incarceration in one's lifetime is bad enough, and here I was back again for a second dose! I wished I had organised the meeting outside Bengal, then I could have experienced life in a new jail. We had become too familiar with all the jails in Bengal, where life had become too distasteful.

At first, no news from outside reached us. They supplied us newspapers with blacked out portions all over. We could not make out anything, even by rubbing lime juice over it, or by holding it up against the light. But very soon we had a wonderful source of news from outside. Gradually, one by one, August revolutionaries started coming to prison. From them, we got a serial description of the history of the movement evolving outside. The first inmate entered with the glow of excitement on her face. Outside, the movement was

in full swing, 'Even at Tata, all the factories have closed down! What more do you want?'

'So, we are truly on the way to freedom?'

'Sure, within six months we will emerge into a free India. Just six months, not a day more than that'. The person making this comment was not one given to exaggeration. This showed how hopeful the nation had become at that time.

Those who came at the fag end—in November and December—had a different expression on their faces. They were downcast and found relief in prison. There was an ebb in the movement, and it was difficult to keep the tempo. Of course, Medinipur, Balia and Satara were still to erupt, where the upsurge emerged as separate, comprehensive, historical episodes. Elsewhere, by December 1942, the pace of the movement had partially subsided.

Gradually, we started losing contact with the outside world and confined ourselves within the four walls of prison. Again, life became for us an 'idle pursuit in solitude, where day and night we had ears only for our thoughts'. We were grateful the authorities did not move us around from one district jail to another, but limited our stay to Calcutta. But the female ward of the Presidency jail was the worst place of all. Space here was most confined, with a pent-up tiny yard; the rooms were shut on three sides and there was a baffle wall stopping the open front door. But our stay in Calcutta compensated for every discomfort.

I do not know why Calcutta attracted us so much. Of course, every fortnight, we had our family visiting; that was happiness indeed. But that was not all. There were many amongst us whose relatives lived away from Calcutta and could not avail of the visits, but they too wished to stay on in the city. Calcutta truly is the heart of the country. And as we stayed near the heart of the country, our banishment from life was not too horrible this time.

From a couple of cells on the first floor, we could get a glimpse of cars and buses passing through the streets of the city. Often, we would sit in front of the windows to enjoy the luxury. One day, this

got us into trouble. One of our friends, after her release, had come to that part of the street which was visible from our windows to get a view of us. Putudi, one of the inmates, got so excited when she saw her that she shouted at the top of her voice 'Karun is there! She has come to see us! How wonderful!' We shouted back and ran upstairs to see Karun through the window. Hearing the noise, the guards nearby became suspicious and pulled us away from the window. The next morning we were called to the superintendent's office, where he questioned us grimly, 'Were you trying to contact your friends outside?' We denied the allegation.

'Didn't you go near the window?'

'Of course we did! Is it forbidden?' we wanted to know. He let us go, as it was our first offense. But the next morning, we found the windows sealed with a thick wire netting to stop us from committing the offence again.

A couple of lady inspectors often came to visit us, but we never came to know why. They never paid any heed to our complaints. When we tried to draw their attention to the miserable quality of food supplied to the common prisoners, they superciliously tasted a piece and commented, 'Why? It's quite tasty!' Once in the heat of summer, we had complained that there were not enough water containers in our rooms. Maybe at their suggestion we were supplied with some, but after that they would never forget to remind us of their magnanimity!

Presidency jail always reminds me of the lunatics who resided there. Whenever there was a shortage of space in mental hospitals, they were sent to Presidency jail. They were kept behind bars in the ground floor cells. There was a beautiful young girl who would keep moaning throughout the night, making the depressing prison nights even more miserable. Who knows what terrible suffering had made her go mad. Her continuous weeping brought us all to the verge of insanity. There was another Anglo-Indian girl who would embrace anyone who came near her, to their great discomfort, and would

come and lie down on our beds and then refuse to get up. She was too strong for us, so we dreaded her approach.

I remember Durgi. She was not really mad, but I do not know how else to describe her. I met her on my first visit to prison; maybe she had been there before my arrival. She was sentenced to short stays, like three months or six months or maybe a year. But after her release, she would stay outside for hardly a month, and would be back again for petty offenses like stealing or snatching things. It seemed she was alone in the world, but she would always make up stories about a husband and a son who went to school.

We noticed how with the passing of time, Durgi was becoming more and more sub-human. She would go around begging things from all of us. At times, she would do some mischief, the guards would beat her mercilessly and she would shout on top of her voice. But within a minute, she would, with bruises all over yet a smile on her face, start begging again.

In spite of all her faults, there was much that was good in her. She offered to do all the jobs that others refused. For example, she would be at the bedside of smallpox patients taking care of them, or she would readily wash the clothes of cholera patients without any hesitation.

One day, after my release, I was at a meeting at Deshabandhu Park with Srijukta Aruna Asaf Ali. Suddenly I heard someone whispering, 'Masima'.

'Hello Durgi. You are here! When did you come out of jail?' She quickly put a finger on her lips and looked around nervously. I realised my mistake and observed her silently. She was neatly attired and had a fresh look. But alas, how long would she be like this, most probably fifteen days or a month!

After the 15th of August, there were plans of releasing all the prisoners. It was most appropriate and fitting that on the day of the nation's freedom, all convicts should be allowed to breathe in freedom. But again, distinctions were being made. Marked, notorious

criminals would not be released. While discussing this point with a friend, I asked, 'Who would you consider to be a marked criminal?'

'Well, probably those who have committed murders,' he replied.

With a sigh, I thought of the murderers I had come across in prison. How they were objects of hatred and could never be forgiven, even on a nation's day of independence. They were indeed misunderstood by all. We had lived closely with these murderers in prison. We found them very ordinary, like the rest of us, with similar vices and virtues, with feelings of love and pity. Their adverse circumstances had provoked them to murder, and in most cases, the reasons were social persecution and poverty.

I remember Saharjan, a young girl in her teens, who had been in prison for poisoning her husband to death. She confessed her guilt but said that she had done it unknowingly. Her husband used to beat her mercilessly, so an uncle gave her a medicine and told her to mix it in his food, for he said it would calm her husband and bring him under her control. She did not know that it was poison. Looking at her simple, innocent face, we believed her. It was quite possible that an uneducated, superstitious girl from the village had trusted her uncle, and for her simple, trusting nature, she was being punished with life imprisonment, at the end of which she would lose all her simplicity and emerge as a changed and unfeeling individual. Spending fourteen years of one's life in incarceration in the company of hardened criminals and cruel, heartless masters would surely bring about that change.

I used to ask myself who would be responsible for her lifelong misery. Society, with its ambience of ignorance and oppression, had compelled her to commit this terrible inhuman crime, and in turn, the man-made laws of society had hurled upon her this cruel punishment. Under the burden of this punishment, her tortured soul would harden and she would emerge from prison disfigured with the dark stains of calumny. Then, finding no place in a normal environment, she will have to seek shelter in the world of crime.

Why only Saharjan? A band of others parade before my mind's eyes. Jahara, a fourteen-year-old bright, sweet-natured girl was loved by all the detenues, who taught her and read stories to her. At the time of the 'Jubilee,' she cried piteously and begged the jailor to let her go. She was not released and within a year died of tuberculosis.

Sadimon and Naimon, an aunt and her niece, seemed innocent; there must have been some mistake when they were charged with murder. Sadimon would say, 'I am old, I am sure I will be buried here. But what will happen to Naimon then?' Naimon, the niece, was not worried about herself, but felt sad for her old aunt. They clung to each other and kept to themselves, away from the turmoil of prison life. Thapus's mother had come to prison with her three-year-old girl. She kept her daughter close to her all the time, fearing that the authorities would snatch her away from her.

There were many others like them. All of them murderers, considered to be beyond reprieve. I failed to understand why these criminals, serving a twenty-year term, could not be pardoned like the others.

FIFTEEN

Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, in his autobiography, has described the absence of children as one of the greatest deprivation in prison life. But in our female ward we did not suffer from this absence. New children were coming all the time and the prison ward echoed with their cries and laughter. We often came very close to them and got involved in their lives.

One evening, as the darkness fell, the door bell rang. Who could be there at this hour? Was it a new prisoner? We all rushed to the door. As it cracked open a dark little boy of four walked in. He looked around and started crying loudly. He wanted to go out again, but the *jamadarni* had already locked the door. Who was this little child, we all wondered. One of us picked him up in her arms and tried to calm him down with promises of a 'red bird' and other imaginary toys.

He stopped crying maybe tempted by the 'red bird' or perhaps comforted by the gentle arms around him. But soon he started shouting again, 'I want my father! Let me go!'

But the child did not know how impervious the doors of prison are, and how no amount of pleading can open them. The *jamadarni* ordered us back to our room and locked us up and locked the boy in with other prisoners in another ward.

Throughout the night we heard his sobs, but we were surprised to see him in the morning walking around cheerfully with the *jamadarnis*. We learned from them that his mother was lying ill in a hospital bed, and his father was an undertrial prisoner in another ward. So Baby Narayan was sent to the female ward. Like a little beggar boy he roamed around. The *jamadarnis* tended him whenever they felt like it, but most of the time he was left to himself. It was heart-rending watching him wash his own dishes after meals.

Living in the midst of squalor in prison, we had grown fastidious about cleanliness. We would comment on Naran's (as we called him) dirty habits, how he was seen playing in the sewers. So we would not let him come near us. But he knew we were soft towards him, so he would come and clasp our arms and lay his head on our laps. We pitied him, still we cried, 'Keep away, don't touch us!' We gave him biscuits and fruits, but that was not what he wanted. Bereft of a parent's love, he hungered for affection. In the beginning, we would wash our hands or change our clothes after he touched us, but soon we got used to him. He would jump on our beds with his dust-laden feet. Every morning he would come and peep through our mosquito nets and shout at us to get up. If we scolded him, he would shout back, 'Don't yell!' We were at a loss about what to do with him.

He accompanied his father to court when he went for trial. One day he returned late and we learned from the *jamadarnis* that his mother had died in hospital and his father would be released after a month.

'Well, Naran, what did the judge say?' we asked him. And with a most serious face, he replied, 'One month's imprisonment'.

So, Naran would be with us only for another month. We all started pampering him. At every meal he would be there with his dish to share our food. The month passed quickly, and soon the day of his departure arrived. The *jamadarni* pulled him out his bed and shouted, 'Get up, Naran! It's time for you to go'.

There was great excitement as we crowded around Naran, feeding him, dressing him up in new clothes, combing his hair and powdering his face. Besides, we all had farewell gifts for him. Who knows what the silly boy was thinking. Maybe he was feeling sorrowful about having to leave so many loving hearts. There was no smile on his face, nor was there his usual endless chatter. He looked at us with his large, mournful eyes as he walked out of the prison gate, but soon we saw him smiling as his father picked him up. 'He will forget us soon enough,' we said. And the philosopher among us commented, 'Well, that is the way of life!'

We soon got over Naran when we found six-month-old Babloo. He was with his mother, who was imprisoned for one year. He was a year-and-a-half when he left us. Throughout the year, he was with us most of the time; his mother hardly ever had a chance to pick him up. We loved the little boy and heaped all kinds of gifts on him and gave him numerous endearing names.

His mother was in jail for stealing. She belonged to a gypsy tribe, and they were thieves by nature. Some of us would say teasingly, 'You know what Babloo will become when he grows up? A leader of thieves!' Others would object, 'No, never. Babloo will become the commander-in-chief of free India's army'. Babloo did not have to opt for either of these alternatives, for within six months after their release, both mother and son died of smallpox.

During our stay in the Presidency jail, we used to organise functions and theatrical shows. This time there were fewer restrictions. The jail authorities helped us in setting up the stage, and we rented dresses and wigs from dressers outside. Consequently, our performances reached quite a high standard of excellence.

Besides, the political prisoners decided to observe all the functions organised by parties outside on political issues. This kept us in close touch with the political world outside and was instructive for the common prisoners. Still, at times we got bored with everything. One evening I had a strange experience, bordering on reality and illusion. Friends had decided to organise Lenin's Day. I was usually an

observer on such occasions, but this time I decided to participate and resolved to prepare an essay on the subject. So, in the evening I shut myself up in my room and with a wrapper around my feet and a lantern by my side. I reclined with a pen and paper.

There was a chill in the air and I was feeling sleepy. With a firm resolution, I set myself up to the task of preparing a homage to Lenin. I had just penned a few lines when I heard a masculine voice ask me laughingly, 'What are you writing?'

I looked up in surprise, and there beside my bed, I saw Lenin. My body was paralysed. Was I dreaming? But it was more real than any dream. Removing the jumble of books from the chair, I offered it to the visitor. Turning over the pages of the books on my table, he said again, 'Well, you did not tell me what you were writing.' Nervously, I handed him the paper. After reading it, he returned the paper with a smile on his face.

Finding my tongue, I asked, 'Is it too bad?'

'No. Why should it be bad? You Bengalis are never amiss at writing. You are the best in the world for creating beautiful nothings with useless words. Even your detractors will agree on this.'

This sudden attack on my people angered me, and in a heated manner I rejoined, 'Oh, is that all you know about Bengalis?'

Lenin's smile became gentle. 'No, I did not mean to hurt you. I know how passionately dedicated you are to a cause. But that is not enough'. After a pause, he continued, 'It's true, you are always ready to sacrifice everything on a moment's impulse; but you are totally unfit for the backbreaking and laborious task of pulling up a dying nation. Unless you are ready to lose yourselves with the millions of poverty-stricken destitutes...'

I spoke up cheerfully, 'Oh, don't you know? We have also started to think along those lines'.

'Who are these 'we'?'

'Well, we the workers. Today almost all political parties are thinking of mass awakening, mass movement.'

I was interrupted, 'You too think in the same way?'

Quite annoyed, I replied, 'Of course, how could you even ask?'

'Well there is such a world of difference between your thoughts and your actions. With my Russian intelligence, I fail to understand you'.

'What difference do you find?'

'What difference, you ask? Your beliefs may be all right, but as a worker, you are a complete failure'.

Disconcerted, I stammered, 'It's true, I didn't do much when I was outside, but I tried. I formed unions in some mills, I led the workers through a successful strike. I visited some villages. I know I did not achieve much, but you know how difficult this kind of work is'.

With a gentle smile he said, 'Don't be downhearted. I am not judging you by your success. I think you don't understand the nature of the work. Or, realising the difficulty of the task, you delude yourself. You do not have the forebearance for such self-sacrifice.'

'Why do you say that?'

'You are spending years in jail, side by side with the downtrodden, poverty-stricken people of your country. But how close do you get to them. What effect do you have on their minds? Do you ever try to teach them anything?'

'You know how difficult it is to reach out to them in jail?'

'Difficult,' he roared with his eyes flashing, 'The word difficult does not exist in a rebel's dictionary. If I were in your place...'

'Yes?'

'I would have broken down all barriers and shown them how absurd it is to try and keep people apart.'

Unconvinced, I said, 'Then they would have taken you away and locked you up in a solitary cell.'

'Well, that would have given me the honour of defeat. But what are you doing? You speak of equality, but here in jail you have formed a group of elite intellectuals and are spending your days in luxury. You treat the common prisoners as your servants and have no concern at all for their well-being.'

'What can we do?'

'You can do everything. You can share all your privileges with them; maybe it won't be much, but it will make them think of you as their own. If you think you don't have enough to share, you can refuse preferential treatment.'

Lots of arguments came piling up: that would only allow the government to save money. Would we able to share such hardship? We were not used to it; our health would break down under the strain. What about our studies? Realising that all these arguments were mere excuses, I remained silent. Lenin continued to look at me, and after a while he asked, 'What are you thinking. It is too difficult, isn't it? It is easier to put your head in the hangman's noose than to bear such affliction from day to day, isn't that so?'

I bowed my head in silence. Lenin stood up, 'I was right. I knew it. And not only you, I know about all the jails in India. Down from Jawaharlal and Jaiprakash to the communist students and workers of today, the problem is the same. You cannot forget your superior position; you cannot forego the privileges and comforts of your class. You just cannot come close to the destitute millions of your country. Your idea of mass uprising is mostly academic; you accept it with your intellect but do not feel it with your heart. Who knows when, after how many years, a batch of true workers will emerge in this country. I had hoped that it would be India after Russia—but with such workers...'

'Binadi? You are sleeping with the light on? Shall I make your bed?' I sat up hurriedly. The exercise book with my half-finished essay lay on the ground. The pencil was still in my hand! At the Lenin Day meeting, I was again a silent observer with nothing to contribute. Someone asked me at the end of the meeting, 'What did you think of my speech?'

'It's useless,' I replied unthinkingly. Seeing her surprised look, I quickly corrected myself, 'No, no, I didn't mean it. Your speech was wonderful, as it always is.'

SIXTEEN

In 1943, we were behind bars where the full impact of the famine did not reach us. But the cries of the hungry thousands that infiltrated through the walls were enough to poison our days and nights. At that time, I had written a letter to a friend, which still lies with me unmailed. I reproduce it here, for I think it contains a picture of my thoughts.

'Dear Uma, I suppose you are thinking how lucky we are to have escaped the horrors of the famine. We do not have to witness the agony and suffering of starving human beings. Looking at pictures in *The Statesman* is not the same as the real thing. Getting agitated from afar on an imagined scene of horror is not the same as standing in the midst of it, helpless and ineffectual. You are right. We have escaped. While you are running around from morning to night, organising free food centres and milk canteens and plying ambulances through mounds of festering dead bodies in search of living creatures crying out for food. In the context of today's excruciating anguish, our life in prison is almost like an escape into an ivory tower. But believe me, our life in prison is not only pleasure. Sorrows and miseries of life reach out to us in our 'palace-like' environs. Prince Siddhartha also lived in a palace. You will protest, it is really a most bizarre comparison. You know this palace, our prison, has another name. Prisoners call

it 'house of sorrow'. I have heard them call it this ever since I arrived in prison. It is such a fitting name; a poet's fancy could not improve it. It is truly a house of sorrow. 'On the unknown shore of this vast ocean/have steered the broken ships of life'. These words of a poet are so true. I find all the 'broken ships' gathered at our prison gates. For all the incapacitated, the disabled and the diseased, the prison seems to be the last resort, the last port of shelter. The inmates seem to be suffering from every known disease, and they seem to have committed every known crime. You once advised me to work on the cause of crime. I think, for these poor destitutes, crime is the only natural path of expression. They have no food, their children die of starvation; what can they do, but steal? They have no knowledge of right and wrong, no comprehension of the social mores; so, in the darkness of ignorance, they succumb to every antisocial and immoral temptation.

On the streets, you find men and women dying silently without any protest. But there are some amongst them who are trying to raise their emaciated, skeleton-like bodies and are making futile attempts to snatch food from the amassed stores of the hoarders.

We were surprised to see them. One evening, we found a crowd of women in our prison courtyard. We wondered why they were there. They looked like ordinary village women, like poor sharecroppers' wives. On enquiry, we found that they were here because they had tried to loot a government lorry carrying rice. There was nothing militant about them; they did not look like robbers at all. We doubted if there was any group or organisation trying to instigate them. But they persisted in saying that they had done it on their own; they were so hungry, they had to do it. We were impressed, though we did not fully believe their words. At first, they were perplexed finding themselves in such strange surroundings; but soon their worries and anxieties for their homes and children overcame them. A young woman who had left her infant boy behind wept incessantly thinking of his plight. There was no one to take care of him but an old, consumptive husband.

Things became clear. Looking at the young woman's tearful face, we realised how acute the pangs of starvation must have been that had driven her to such extremes. The government did not keep them long, for then they would have to feed them. We told each other, 'They would rather let them die outside.'

Next came another group. They were not looters; they had come from the village to sell rice in the city. The government had prohibited movement of food grains from village to city. They had heard about the rules; but they were only trying to make some money by buying rice from the hoarders and selling it in the city with a small margin.

We read in the papers that the government was trying to curb profiteers and we support them too. But we had thought of profiteers as corpulent, potbellied moneybags, made immobile by overeating, who lived in the evergrowing, newfangled places of Calcutta. You must be thinking the same. You must come here to get a correct picture of 'profiteers' and 'enemies of the people' as according to our government. You will find old women turned grey, with all their teeth decaying; old women bent double with age; again, there are young girls with hunger throwing a pallor over their youthful charm; also there is a mother with her two ailing sons starving at home.

Doesn't this make you feel like crying out, 'Long live the noble efforts of the government of our ever-friendly Amery-Wavell-Nazimuddin!' Let them be successful in their efforts to exterminate all hoarders and profiteers! They are sure to be successful when they have put so many dangerous 'enemies of the people' behind bars!

Pay us a visit, and you will witness strange sights unknown to people outside. How are you? We hope to come out soon; that is, if the rumours we hear are correct. Yours, Bina.'

SEVENTEEN

Time passed. It had been three years for us behind the bars of Presidency jail. One morning, in the month of May 1945, news came to us through newspapers that the war was over. Important news indeed. The whole world was anxiously waiting for this day. The lives of millions depended on this decision. But we selfishly thought only of our own release. Now that the war was over, the government would surely let us go.

We were released. One beautiful autumn morning, we walked out of prison. We had hoped to come out in free India, but that was not to be. We found ourselves in the midst of a country ravaged by war, scarred by famine, a dying India in the grip of ordinances clamped on us by a foreign rule.

Still, it is true that in the midst of failure, one can always find seeds of success. As in the life of man, so in the life of a nation there is hope within the core of despair. Often we think we have reached the end of our endurance and there is nothing but darkness ahead of us. But soon our fears are belied, and we find our fount of life replenished to the brim. In the life of a nation, too, come periods of depression and defeat. But through these phases come rebirth and rejuvenation which we are too shortsighted to notice at first.

It surprises us beyond belief when we see the complete picture of the emerging future.

Our condition was somewhat similar when we came out. We were expecting to find a totally demoralised society. War had broken down all our social values and the people had degenerated to unforeseen levels of corruption. The 'black market' had darkened the whole economy of the country, which had reached the nadir of debasement in the horrors of the famine. After reaching its lowest point, an almost imperceptible upswing was becoming apparent. Gradually it became clear to us that there was a difference. The nation was pulling itself out of the devastation of the last few years, with its moral fibre strengthened by the terrible experiences they had encountered.

A few days after coming out of jail, we learned about the forthcoming session of the All India Congress Committee to be held in Bombay. My sister Chutudi was living there, so my father and I left for Bombay. My heart was filled with joy at the thought of traveling with Father, visiting Chutudi, sightseeing in Bombay, and above all, attending the All India Congress Committee session, which was being conducted on a very large scale.

But this session of the All India Congress Committee was not particularly productive. After the failure of the Simla Conference, the country wanted new guidelines and new incentive for work. But the A.I.C.C. had nothing to offer. They merely asked us to wait for further orders. I learned from others that the 1942 session was held at the same place where Gandhiji was arrested and his wife Kasturba continued with the meeting. The police had tried to disperse the meeting with tear gas, sticks and gunshots, but they failed as the workers kept their ground, bravely waving flags in their hands. Women volunteers helped the injured, heedless of the bullets flying around. They were desperate. In comparison, this conference was totally lifeless.

The 1942 conference was attended by workers and fighters, whereas this conference was crowded mostly with visitors and at sightseers, who had bought tickets at exorbitant rates. Fighters of the 1942 struggle had become backbenchers at this session, while moneyed businessmen had procured front seats. I could not understand why they had come. Was Congress becoming a place for entertainment? Mahatmaji had criticised the pomp of the 1928 Congress session held in Calcutta and had described it as a circus. What would he say about this session? Most of the workers disapproved of this show and the authorities decided against holding an open session for visitors in the future. There was a resolution on the August 1942 movement. In general, it was acceptable; only there was a line expressing regret at the violence perpetrated during the movement. Many of us did not like the use of the word 'regret'. It was true that the policy of the Congress was based on non-violence, but during a mass upheaval, some violent outbursts were inevitable, and offering an apology for the inevitable was rather demeaning for an organisation like the Congress. There was something hypocritical about the expression, for besides Mahatmaji, there were few true supporters of the creed of non-violence in the Congress ranks. This seemed to be an effort to appease the British power, or maybe it was out of respect for Mahatmaji.

At that time, there were many underground rebel workers of the August movement living in hiding in Bombay. I met some of them. Achyut Patwardhan impressed me the most. A hidden fire seemed to be burning within him, his eyes flashing all the time. He was extremely critical of the Congress resolution. He commented, 'This is your Congress leadership! They have no programme to offer. They do not show the way before going to prison. The common people chalked out their own path of action and, staking everything, fought against the government—today they have lost everything, their home, their dear ones, in their fight against the ruthless police. Now the storm is over and the leaders coming out of prison are coming forth with complacent

remarks of 'regret' for the violence committed by the people.' I was in agreement with him on the issue of 'regret'.

I also met Aruna Asaf Ali. This rebel from Bengal was loved and respected by all. In her simplicity, she appeared like the girl next door. We easily became friends, and I asked her about her life when she had absconded. She had hidden in many places in Bengal and they had had secret meetings in the Brahmo Samaj Mandir. I wanted to know what the Mandir authorities thought of it, for they were known to be afraid of revolutionaries.

'Well, I am also a member of the Brahmo Samaj, so they could not just turn me out,' she remarked. Aruna's grandfather, Trailokya Nath Sanyal, was a famous leader and chorister of the Brahmo Samaj and that gave her a claim on the place. She came home with us and Chutudi offered her a warm welcome and food. She was on the run, and who knew if she found proper sustenance always.

I visited Yusuf Meher Ali, who was then suffering from an illness and lay bedridden. But his probing mind was roaming around the world, actively assessing the political situation. He commented on the current politics and remarked, 'I would have been happy to have you in the Congress Socialist Party'. He had a high opinion of some of the workers in Bengal and was full of praise for some of them. 'They are pure gold,' he said. At this, my sense of Meher Ali's power of character analysis suffered somewhat. As he was ailing, I did not go into any confrontation. Finding his bed and bed side table scattered with books, I remarked, 'Does the doctor allow you to read so many books?'

'No he doesn't. But I don't pay any heed to him. How will I survive without reading?'

Another day we had lunch with Minoo Masani at his residence. There was a lot of furor in jail over his latest work *Socialism Reconsidered.* I told him about it. All his thoughts were centred around that subject. His shelves were packed with books on criticism of socialism and he kept asking me if I had read the books. I went on replying in the negative. Finally, he lost his temper and complained.

'Why do you come into politics without reading anything?' I was too shy to tell him that 'there are other books than those on your shelf'. Well, proving myself to be a fool, I returned home downhearted. Reaching home, I heaved a sigh of relief and thought about what a mistake it was for me, a worker, to visit such an intellectual theoretician who was a socialist mostly in his studies.

Most of the delegates from Bengal returned home after the end of the A.I.C.C. session. We stayed on, for we had not seen all the sights in Bombay yet, and I still needed to recuperate. Before leaving Calcutta, I had been reminded by many of my colleagues, 'Don't forget that you are secretary of the South Calcutta branch of the Congress'. I resented these reminders. I felt that if the Congress could survive for three years when I was in jail, couldn't it give me a further three weeks' respite! Being in politics should not stop one from being human. I remembered how Lila Roy had commented in an article in *Jayasri* on 'the limitless, all consuming demand of politics'. This is indeed a very true description. Politics is truly an all-consuming vocation. At times, my mind rebels against it. I feel I am in politics because I choose to be; I love my country and I have become a political worker of my own volition. Why should I stand for criticism from others?

Later, I thought maybe this was only natural. When you dedicate your life to the people, you must be prepared to meet all their demands, whether just or unjust. The greater your sphere of activity, the smaller becomes your world of personal desires and dreams. But it is still true that you cannot leave yourself out altogether. You must learn to strike a proper balance. Losing your identity in concourse of the multitude is truly self-destructive; it harms both you and the nation. There are a few who do not lose themselves in the midst of millions; they retain their integrity in the turmoil of the crowd and remain true to the music of their souls. This is a trait you have to develop through much effort. Most of us cannot acquire it, and as a result, suffer from the fury of action, when there is an urge in us to escape from everything into a distant world of utter loneliness

where in deep silence we can live sans friends, sans enemies, sans wealth and sans poverty!

In Bombay, I was not really in this frame of mind. I was just tempted to have a holiday. In a short span of time, we completed sightseeing in Bombay, moving around in Chutudi's car. Then Father and I went to Poona with a friend.

The countryside from Bombay to Poona is indeed enchanting. On both sides of our path were hills covered with multifarious trees and colourful flowers. In between there were waterfalls that came down in silvery cascades like necklaces of pearl. We passed through fields of green vegetation that lay like many shaded verdant carpets, and also through dark forests shrouded in mystery. In my imagination, the hills resounded with hoofbeats as Maharaja Shivaji and his stalwarts rode with their conquering armies. The hills echoed with tales of their glory.

We stayed at a hotel in Poona. The same evening we went to visit Gandhiji, who was then residing in a health resort. He smiled at me, and asked, 'Why have you come?'

'You visited me once when I was in jail. Think of this as my return visit.'

He smiled and said, 'Then you should have visited me in jail.' I wanted to ask him about some current problems, but he wearily replied, 'The working committee is there to answer these questions. I do not wish to be disturbed, for then I won't be able to live till I am 125, but I have to live.'

He seemed really tired and broken down. He had grown old in these years. I also remembered how two tragic events had occurred in his personal life during his last prison tenure. These events had touched him deeply. I bid him goodbye without any further questions. We learned that the burial place of Mahadev Desai and Kasturba lay nearby. We could visit them in the evening, but we also wished to attend Gandhiji's evening prayers. We had to make a choice. I was inclined towards the burial ground, but my friend, a

journalist, wished to attend the prayers out of professional interest. That clinched our decision and we attended the prayers.

We spent a day visiting the sights in Poona. We went to the office of *Kesari*, the important political paper of Maharashtra. They were glad to hear that we were from Bengal. 'There is great similarity between Bengalis and Maharastrians. We should be close to each other,' they said.

We went to the Poona Congress office, which was housed in a large building with a spacious hall and a huge marble-floored terrace. A meeting of four to five thousand people could easily be organised in this building. The Bombay Congress office was just as palatial. All the time I was reminded of our poor, pent-up, circumscribed rented room on the terrace of College Street market. We told them that they were rich people, so they could afford such spacious offices. 'There are rich people in Bengal too. You do not know how to raise funds. It's your fault,' they replied.

The next day we returned from Poona. An interesting incident occurred on our return journey. Father was not feeling well and I wanted some water for his medicine. I looked around and was thinking of going to the platform to get some, when an extremely handsome Punjabi gentleman from our compartment took the glass from my hand and offered to get water for us. When the train started, I looked up at his face to thank him. He looked familiar. Thanks to my younger brother, I went to the cinema at times and was somewhat familiar with names of filmstars. I whispered to my friend, 'He must be Prithviraj. We must find out.' My guess was correct, and soon we came to know each other.

Prithviraj spoke about his life and art. He remarked, 'We must try to rouse the patriotic spirit of the people through drama and turn their attention towards the problems of the nation. Our leaders should think of this.' I requested him to sing a song or recite a poem for my father. He readily agreed and with deep emotion, he recited Rabindranath's song in slightly accented Bengali 'Amar matha noto

korey dao hey tomar charan dhular porey.' (Let me bow my head in the dust at your feet.)

After returning from Poona, we started making plans of visiting the caves of Ajanta and Ellora. The place was far and the way was not easy. Father would not be able to go. We looked around for companions and soon found a group.

In a group of five or six, we set out for that world of eternal beauty from the past. I will not try to describe the beauty of Ajanta and Ellora. Words fail to capture the glory created by the sculptors and artists in the days gone by. It would be futile on my part, with my almost total ignorance of the tenets of art, to try and describe its beauty. In the hidden caves of these distant hills we found such wonderful portraits of life's fulfilment that we were thrilled to the core of our being. The inexpressible beauty of Ajanta and Ellora is not only a feast for the eyes, but has to be comprehended with the fullness of one's heart and the depth of one's understanding of life. In that early dawn of civilisation, almost beyond the scope of history, were there men with such depth of feeling? With such powers of contemplation? With the capacity for creating such timeless beauty? We stood overwhelmed and lost in thought. Had we progressed at all from those days of yore? We in India can only have sighs of woe, lamenting all our lost glory.

One could spend hours gazing at the paintings of Ajanta, amazed at the depth of feeling and wordless pain expressed in the portraits of Buddhist Bhikkhus. All the paintings are beautiful, but I was especially moved by a particular portrait where, after attaining emancipation, Buddhadev returns to the palace and stands looking up at his wife Jasodhara's door with the beggar's bowl in his hand and inexplicable emotions marking his face. I cannot forget that face. With conflicting emotions of selfless detachment and painful involvement, of sacrifice and love, of emancipation and communion. Even today that face flashes in front of my eyes sometimes.

I asked my companion if Greek art was more beautiful. We had been charmed by Greek pictures seen in illustrations. We needed a

true expert to explain to us the difference between the two schools of art. I imagined myself visiting Greece, Rome and Florence, standing awestruck by the beauty of the works of Michelangelo, Leonardo Da Vinci and Raphael. Impossible dreams, with little chance of ever being fulfilled! Still dreams are wonderful!

My days of dreaming were almost over. My conscience was starting to chide me for spending too much time in pleasure. I should now return to the battlefield where lines were being drawn everyday for the coming movement. We, who hoped to be in the front ranks, should no longer dally with our time. All the time we heard voices calling, 'Comrades! Attention!'

EIGHTEEN

Returning to Calcutta, I took up my work at the South Calcutta Congress. Everything was in disarray since 1942. The first imperative was to set up an office. We looked around and after much difficulty, found a place that might be suitable. We organised the place by putting up a signboard and procuring a few chairs, a table, a mat on the floor and subscribed to a daily newspaper. I was still unaware of the situation outside. I was planning to come in the morning and evening to sit alone most of the time, or gossip with friends if they came in, go over the papers and then leave after locking up. I was not ready for the miraculous change that had taken place in the meantime.

As soon as the office was opened, it was overcrowded with visitors. Morning, noon and evening, men were coming and going all the time. Now for all their problems, people were rushing to the Congress office. The room was most inadequate. Everyone was annoyed as they had no place to sit. They were greatly displeased if they found the office closed, even for a short time. They wanted us to be in attendance all the time.

Ordinances had been lifted after a long time. So I organised a mass meeting at the same old Hazra Park. It was most successful, with a vast assemblage of men and women swarming the park and on the roads outside. Congress volunteers had organised the meeting

efficiently, and the speakers were most eloquent and inspiring in their speeches. So all the listeners went home greatly satisfied.

At home, I was congratulated for my organising abilities. Where were these people all this time? I remembered how in 1942 I was picked up by the police from a meeting in an almost empty Hazra Park.

When the pressure of work increased tremendously, came the time for enrolling Congress members. There was a great demand for membership forms and an inadequate supply caused a lot of annoyance. We were criticised for our incompetence. But this criticism did not depress us, for we were reminded of the times when we made futile calls from door to door begging people to become members of the Congress, and how after hours of discussions and arguments we returned empty handed. This new experience was indeed invigorating. Besides enrolment of members, numerous other duties were thrust upon us. Volunteer corps had to be organised, parades and rallies had to be arranged, girls in groups were being taught how to cycle and how to run schools in slums. We were also given the task of organising the industrial workers in Khidirpur, Tollygunge and the neighbouring areas. We also planned a training centre for trade union workers. But nothing seemed to work out according to plan, for want of discipline and competent leadership. All fingers of criticism were pointed at me. 'The secretary is responsible for all this mismanagement, she is incompetent and lacks in ideas,' they commented.

The secretary took all the blame. I was aware of all my faults and deficiencies. True, it was the most difficult task to organise a regional congress in a city like Calcutta. It was almost like running a parallel government. At every crisis, whenever anything went wrong, people would rush to the Congress office. Whenever there was a law and order problem, or acts of police oppression, or any commotion, everyone wanted to know what we were doing.

We had very little power but lots of responsibilities. The Congress would surely have been a much sounder and more respected organisation if it had been in better and more able hands. In those days,

the common people looked at the Congress with much faith and respect. We lost much of it because of our incompetence and deficiencies. Often we could not understand where our fault lay, but we did realised that we lacked in personality and intelligence. Our only consolation was that we were trying to do our best, and believe me when I say that we had not a moment to spare.

The workers worked hard but they were not many in number, actually, we were most inadequately staffed for such an important district office. Another grave drawback was that we were not capable of training new workers, so the pressure was all the time on the few of us who tried their utmost without much success.

I remember those days so clearly. We set out early in the morning, with a cup of tea at times, returning home late at night without a moment's rest in between. Our lunch consisted of either chapatti and curry in a wayside shop, or just a snack of puffed rice and fries while working in the office. I was also working as a teacher in a local school where, mercifully, the authorities were indulgent towards my irregularities. I had to work for the money, but I always put my Congress work ahead of my school duties.

My family was in total despair about me. Father blamed the Congress and accused them of making me work too hard. But I was dissatisfied with my work. Often I failed in my duties, causing much annoyance all around. My comrades tried their best to cover up for me. 'The secretary is after all human. You can't expect her to be everywhere at the same time'. Soon there came a way of escape from this tornado of activities. It was decided that I would have to represent South Calcutta in the coming Assembly elections. Hoping that the South Calcutta District Congress would fall in abler hands, I heaved a sigh of relief!

NINETEEN

The action of the students on 21 November 1945 came as an eye-opener. We all realised what a revolutionary change had taken place in the life of the nation in the last three years. It was eight o'clock in the evening when we heard the news in the Congress office. The students had organised a procession demanding the release of the imprisoned leaders of Netaji's Azad Hind Fauj.

We left immediately to make enquiries and meet the students. There was a tumultuous crowd near Wellington Square and we would have to reach the heart of it to find out what was happening. I took off my wristwatch and, handing it over along with my pen and purse to a friend, rushed into the melee to meet the leaders. The students wished to reach Dalhousie Square, the centre of the government, but the police would not allow the procession to go there as it was supposed to be a prohibited area. In order to stop the rebellious students they had opened fire and as a result, many were injured and killed. The wounded and dead had been taken to the hospital, but the rest of the students were still waiting to proceed towards Dalhousie Square. Nothing would deter them from their resolve, not even the bullets of the British police.

We felt the government was unnecessarily exaggerating the issue and making it a big problem. This was an example of the priggishness

of the British who were always a stickler for rules. They waited for formal orders even before putting out a fire. Why was Dalhousie Square still a prohibited area when the rest of the city was open? Most of us did not even know about this restriction. The government could have easily waived the rule and avoided this confrontation. But they were too rigid to bend; instead, they would shoot down the students and stop them from proceeding.

The students remained adamant. It had now become an issue of prestige for them. They had to avenge the deaths of their comrades by completing their mission.

We tried to deter them by explaining that reaching Dalhousie Square was not important enough to call for such human sacrifice, that there was more important work waiting for them and they should not waste their lives in this futile manner. But all our words were in vain. They remained firm in their decision. Some other Congress leaders came to speak with them like Dr Shyama Prasad Mukherji who tried hard to bring about a compromise. The students would have listened to Sarat Chandra Bose, the elder brother of their revered Netaji, but he was not available.

The students spent many nights squatting on the pavements of Dharamtala. Although we did not fully agree with them, their determination called for our respect and admiration. There have been numerous examples of individual courage and self-sacrifice, but this determined, non-violent stand of thousands of students en masse was something novel and admirable. This certainly marked a new outburst of energy in our national life.

I returned home at the break of dawn. But the students stood by their resolution and, joined by many more, proceeded towards their goal, braving bullets. Finally, the government rescinded their order and the students reached Dalhousie. But more than conquering Dalhousie, the spirit of youth in India had won a battle against the ruthless British tyranny.

The same thing occurred again in February on Rashid Ali Day. The situation was the same. The students, with their demand

for the release of the Azad Hind Fauj leaders, were proceeding towards Dalhousie Square against government orders. They marched courageously in the face of flying bullets. The only difference in the scene was the comradeship between Hindu and Muslim students. The Congress flags and the League flags were both hoisted together on the streets of Calcutta. People became hopeful that Hindus and Muslims were learning to stand side by side against the British rule. They seemed to be forgetting their differences, and all this was happening through the sacrifice of young students in Bengal.

The gods of Bengal's destiny must have laughed, for within a few months, Rashid Ali Day turned into Direct Action Day of 16 August.

The student's movement of November and Rashid Ali Day of February were not limited to students only. The general public of Calcutta had also participated in the action. There was unforseen excitement all around. There was a rampant use of bullets from the rifles of policemen, and machine guns of soldiers. Within a very short time, Calcutta was surrounded by armoured military vehicles. But nothing could stop the agitation.

Defying police action, the common people rushed forward attacking the military vehicles and police cordons and burning down shops and offices owned by Englishmen. Who were these rebels? Porters, rickshaw pullers, fruit sellers, hawkers, boys from clubs, students from schools, clerks from offices; all ordinary people, but anger and determination writ large on their faces.

We, the Congress workers, were now in a fix. The dam of human energy had burst—there was a spontaneous uprising of the common man. It was almost like a sudden volcanic eruption of suppressed human emotions. It was beyond our powers to stop it. But we could not join the meaningless human carnage either. We were certain that this was a shortlived movement. It would subside as suddenly as it had erupted as it was totally unplanned, aimless and without any organisational leadership behind it. There were some amongst us who dreamt of turning this uprising into a nation-wide mass movement,

but to most of us this was an absurd plan. So we felt that it was our task to control this excitement. We went around convincing people in the name of the Congress that the struggle for freedom was yet to come. We must control our energies and wait for that day in the future.

But, 'that day' never arrived. Secretly, the British powers had almost completed their plans of leaving India. They no longer wished to face the fury of the emerging Indian masses. After the 1942 movement, the Azad Hind Fauj, the naval uprising in Bombay, and the outbursts on the streets of Calcutta in November and February, the British rulers had realised that they could no longer ignore the Indian spirit. As a 'nation of shopkeepers', they felt it was no longer profitable to stay on in India. They decided to drop the ruler's baton and look around for ways and means of keeping a foothold in the future politics of the subcontinent.

At this time, an Englishman had commented, 'India today is like a heap of gunpowder; any tiny spark can bring the country to flames.' Though this spark did not come from the British, it was through their provocation that the reactionary communalists raised their evil heads. Calcutta burst into flames on Direct Action Day on the 16th of August. The flame is still burning, and I fear that it might turn the country into ashes before it is extinguished.

I have no words to describe the pain and shame of the events that took place in our country after the 16th of August. I do not know if civil war in such an ugly shape has ever occurred anywhere. I think the confrontation of the communists and Chiang Kai-Shek in China was more civil. Is there such cowardice and ugly violence in the conflict of the Jews and Arabs in Palestine even?

All this time, Mahatmaji had tried to strike a high emotional chord in the nation's mind in our non-violent struggle for freedom. But we paid him back in full by stooping to such inhuman depths of communal violence. We Indians have truly proven ourselves a spiritual-minded peace-loving nation indeed! It would not have been as ignominious if we had shed all this blood in our fight for

freedom. The cause would have justified everything. But this civil war, the killing of Hindus and Muslims, was altogether meaningless and shameful.

Religious war is completely outdated in the twentieth century, and as perpetrators, Indians should be boycotted from civilised society. We cannot free ourselves of this guilt by putting the blame on the British. We should be ashamed to have been such fools as to play into the hands of a third party.

Many are of the opinion that if the Congress had fought for freedom instead of achieving it through discussions, then this communal civil war would not have taken place. But this is hard to believe for facts do not prove it. In all previous movements the Muslim public or the Muslim League had hardly ever been active participants. On the other hand, as the Congress moved more and more towards a mass movement, the Muslims, almost 99 per cent of them, started alienating themselves from it and turned to the nakedly communal leadership of the Muslim League. Twenty years of freedom struggle since non-cooperation did not bring the Hindus and the Muslims any closer, rather they drifted away from each other. So the argument that they would have come together through a revolution does not have any basis.

Many argue that though the Muslim League did not participate in the 1942 movement, they did not go against it or oppose it. Maybe they did not oppose it then because the time was not ripe yet. As soon as the transference of power became imminent, their demand for Pakistan became loud and clear. Today it appears that the British are leaving this country of their own accord, condescendingly, bestowing on us our freedom, and the communal contentions seem to be the result of the 'compromising policy of the Congress'. But let us imagine that the British acceded defeat after the 1942 struggle and decided to leave. Then they would have transferred power into the hands of a political party, which would most probably have been the Congress. On that occasion, the Muslim League would have erupted in the same fashion as they are doing today.

Instead of putting all the blame of the communal discord on the political process, we should look deeper to find the real cause. With our minds poisoned by communal hatred, we accuse the British of mean manipulation and reproach the Muslims for their cruel and violent nature. We need to analyse the problem and find out the root cause buried deep in the historic past, in the socioeconomic makeup and in the psychology of the people. Maybe then we can find out the reason behind such hatred and thus free ourselves from this complex, for it is true that 'to understand is to forgive'. I do not wish to interpret the present communal conflict by placing the blame on the British or on the Muslims. It is too obvious an explanation and a further repetition is unnecessary. I do not wish to underscore the economic and political reasons, but for some time now, the social cause has been looming large over my sorrowing mind. I further feel that our Hindu society is not fully conscious of it. We turn a blind eye towards this subject. We seem to have forgotten how in the distant past the Hindus had erected social barriers all around themselves to protect society from infiltration and iniquity. This hardened into deep hatred for the Muslims and, in course of time, an impenetrable wall was erected between the two communities.

I wish to put down here in writing an incident which I have often related to many. When I was returning from Noakhali, on the steamer, I befriended a college going Muslim girl. As we grew closer, I tried to explain to her the absurdity of trying to establish a state based on religion in this modern age. 'You are a student of history; can you cite any example from history?' She did not make any rejoinder at that moment, and I felt confident of having impressed her with my persuasive arguments. But soon, shattering my elation, she spoke out with deep emotion in her voice, 'You do not cast away your food if a dog or a cat comes near it. But you throw it away if perchance we come nearby. With such deep hatred in your hearts, you hope to make us your friends?'

Weakly, I stammered a reply, 'We Congressmen are not like that....'

She queried, 'How many of you are there? Not even one-tenth of all Hindus.'

I had no reply. In that young girl, I could see the hurt pride of all educated young Muslims. They are the backbone of the Muslim League; from village to village they are building it up with all their strength. Unless we can soothe their injured pride and truly make them our friends, we shall not be able to demolish the Muslim League, however reactionary we may consider it to be. It will be impossible to bring an end to this cruel killing of Hindus and Muslims. By putting sword against sword, one can only divide the country forever. We can never hope to unite India and make her strong.

I beg our leaders and Hindu nationalists to give some thought to this problem. I wish to remind them of the harsh, heartbreaking curse uttered by our ever perceptive poet,

> The messenger of death at your door?
> Putting a curse on your pride of caste
> If you still stand aloof,
> Binding yourself in encircling pride
> Then only in death you will be one with all.

During the days of the Calcutta killings, we stood aside and watched the carnage in helpless anger. So many innocent men died before our eyes. So many were rendered homeless by the fires of rioting, so many women turned raving mad as they lost their sons and daughters and husbands. From all corners, heart-rending calls came for help, but we stood powerless without ammunition or courage or ability. Men in power in the country, instead of helping the helpless, became the chief perpetrators of the crime. As a result, in four days, more than five thousand men and women were killed. But we, proving our limitless patience and extent of insensitivity, continued with our normal daily lives. We did not know then that this was only

the beginning and not the end of the riots. Two months after the Calcutta tragedy, we received a telegram from Noakhali, 'Condition here is terrifying. In comparison, the Calcutta rioting was nothing.'

When we reached Noakhali, the situation was partially under control. Suchetadi was already there, Labanyadi as well, and we heard that Mahatmaji would arrive soon. Suchetadi told us, 'I tried my best and pulled out the besieged people from their ravaged homes, But what is to be done with them? They cannot live like this for long. This problem is too big for me to solve. Bapuji is coming, I leave everything to him. It is too much for me.' We realised how urgent it was to stay on and help Suchetadi. But I had to return to Calcutta.

TWENTY

The pressure of work that called me back from Noakhali in those dark days centred around the most unexpected cease of work by the press workers of *Amrita Bazar Patrika.*

For quite some time, trouble was brewing in the ranks of the *Patrika.* I had given a strike notice on behalf of the workers before leaving for Noakhali, so I had to return in ten days as I was then the president of the worker's union.

I had organised a few workers' strikes in the past, so I was not totally inexperienced about the difficulties of the task. But everything paled in comparison to the problems of the *Amrita Bazar* strike. We were in a tight spot. We had staked a great deal on this strike including our political future, our faith in the ideals of the much publicised *kisan mazdoor* government, and above all our aim of establishing the Congress in the workers' struggle.

The *Amrita Bazar Patrika* Union had been formed a short time back. Taradas had come to me in April with the proposal of forming a union for the press workers of the *Patrika.* They had approached many other leaders, but no one had agreed to help. Nobody wanted to go against the powerful news media, for they feared bad publicity. Could we take up their case? As leaders, we were not big enough to fear loss of publicity, neither were we aware of its importance.

Our sense of political integrity also stopped us from turning away from suffering workers who had sought our help. We accepted the challenge and readily agreed. Bireswarbabu, Taradas and I went along with the workers and their union was formed. In the beginning, the press workers were hesitant about joining the union. Not more than twenty would attend the meeting, and they were all afraid to speak out. But they overcame this in a couple of months. Gradually, almost everybody joined the union. Besides the press workers, other office workers and subeditors also came forward and became members. All their complaints and grievances that they had suppressed through the years burst forth at this opportunity. Workers who had toiled for the paper selflessly for almost fifty years were being paid measly sums of thirty or forty rupees. Tired, decrepit and bleary eyed, these old men were a living protest against the paper, renowned for its progressive stance and socialistic attitude and applauded for its outspoken demands for justice.

Besides these old hands, there were the young men conscious of the demands of the modern times. They accused the *Amrita Bazar* authorities of inhuman behaviour, favouritism and nepotism. The main task of the union was to fight these evils. With so much dissatisfaction brewing in the minds of the workers, a strike was inevitable. We did not instigate the strike, it was a spontaneous outburst. But the *Patrika* kept on accusing us of being communists, of trying to destroy the paper. There was not a single communist among the organisers and we were all Congress workers, but the authorities went on insisting that we had played into the hands of the communists. They painted us as fools who did not understand the tricks of the communists.

At this time, we had expected more help from the Congress, but we were disappointed. Many important questions came to the forefront, questions which required immediate answers. It was held that the Congress should remain impartial in conflicts between owners and workers; they must try to be fair arbitrators. But we had repeatedly declared that the Congress was an organisation of the masses and, it

should line up with the workers. The aim of the Congress was to set up a *kisan mazdoor* government, so it must support the workers and cultivators in their justifiable demands. Were we then wrong in our assessment of the Congress?

If so, then we must change our stance. If our stand was correct, then the Congress could never remain impartial in a conflict. As Congress workers, we were organising the *mazdoors* against the mill owners in their demand for justice and fair dealings. But if the Congress took a neutral stand, the *kisans* and *mazdoors* would certainly turn their backs on the Congress and turn to other political parties more supportive of their demands.

Another question that was raised was whether we had informed the Congress and taken its permission before starting the strike against *Amrita Bazar Patrika*. The Congress could not be expected to support each and every strike started in its name all over the country. There was no labour subcommittee at that time, so we did not know where to seek permission. It is not practicable to summon an executive meeting to sanction a strike. If we had known that such was the rule, then we would certainly have tried to seek the permission of the executive committee.

Besides, it was well known that we were working with the *mazdoors*. All the senior members of the Congress were aware of it. They had often asked us to see into various *mazdoor* problems, so we never thought that we were leading the *Amrita Bazar* strike on our own. We always trusted that the Congress as a political party was behind us with its support. We were in a dismal plight when the Congress refused to extend any help to the strikers. We were in the same predicament as Ratnakar Dasyu, who had robbed people to feed his family but was disowned by his parents and wife when he asked them to share in his crime.

We lost face with the strikers when the Congress failed to come to our help. They had called us to lead their strike only because they knew us to be Congressmen. Well, in spite of everything, we continued with the strike with steel-like determination. Our

embarrassment was slightly reduced when Kamaladi, secretary of women's subcommittee of the Congress, came to our help with her workers and picketed with us at the gates. Some Congress workers came forward on their own to help us. The president and secretary of the students' wing of the Congress were always by our side. All the students' organisations in the city were wholehearted in their support. The strikers' fund was enriched by donations from the public and other workers' organisations. After a long, hard struggle, our strike ended successfully. Today, the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* union has a strong base; the workers' dedication and sacrifice did not go in vain. At the end of the strike, I decided to return to Noakhali. Taradas jokingly asked if I was running away from criticism. I replied that the urge was deeper.

TWENTY-ONE

When I returned to Noakhali, the horror of the days of rioting was over. Under Mahatmaji's guidance, Suchetadi was setting up Congress camps in the ravaged villages and putting Congressmen in charge. They would help in the rehabilitation of the villages to revive their broken spirit and create an atmosphere of communal amity. Four of us, including Mridula Datta who had just completed her M.A., Taracharan who was a college student, Doctor Govenkar from Medical College Bombay and I, were sent to work in the Noakhola village in Ramgunj Thana. It was a place of ill repute. We got cold shivers when we arrived with our baggage into this grim environment. All around us we only saw scorched huts with not a single human face inside. The fields were dry and barren. We knocked at the door of a partially burnt down hut. The owner of the hut, aged Baikuntha Datta and his granddaughter Kamini came out to see us. Learning that we were from the Congress, the old man almost started shedding tears of relief and joy. 'Only I know how we are living in this deserted, godforsaken place!' All the women of his household had run away and taken shelter in a neighbour's home as the house was larger and in a better condition. The owner of the house was the local postmaster and we asked him if we could set up our camp there.

We spent the first few days looking around Noakhola and other neighbouring villages. We had to make a list of the sufferers, for soon we would receive money for rehabilitation. This was an opportunity to get acquainted with the villagers. As news spread about our camp, villagers started returning to their deserted homes. News about the rehabilitation money acted as an added incentive.

In a week's time, the village bore a changed look, and we started forgetting the first few nightmarish days. Choudhury House and Thakur House were the two largest houses of the village. Both these houses were burnt to ashes. Eight inmates of the Choudhury House were murdered. When Gandhiji visited this ransacked house, there was no one to welcome him but a black dog, a pet of the house who showed him around the deserted rooms. This touching incident brought tears to Gandhiji's eyes. Members of the Thakur House were spared, but the house itself was ravaged. This was the home of a renowned family of intellectuals and learned academics. They had built up a library of rare Sanskrit books and manuscripts which they had stored with great care. This library was burnt to ashes, and not a single sheet was to be found anywhere.

We noticed that in Noakhali, rich landlords and zamindars were the main targets of the attack. We also learned from the local Hindus that these zamindars were often cruel and tyrannical towards their subjects. So the economic reasons behind these attacks could not be ignored, which had aggravated the communal poison that was inciting the Muslim villagers. But the poor Muslim villagers were just as poor as always. Where had all the robbed property and money gone, we wondered. We asked them, 'Where have all the looted money and riches gone? You are still in rags, in broken huts!' Our words touched their hearts, though they didn't say anything in reply.

As a proof of normalcy returning, the villagers organised a musical night at the Thakur House, where choral religious songs were sung throughout the night. The villagers had hidden their musical instruments in the nearby jungles and ponds. They brought them out and,

with gusto, sang to the accompaniment of the harmonium, drums and cymbals.

The Hindus of Noakhali were predominantly Baishnabs, with beads around their necks and gurus in Nabadwep. Baishnabs were usually gentle and peace loving, so they had offered no resistance to the rioters and had succumbed in a cowardly manner.

We know that Bengalis are usually averse to hard work. But the laziness of the Hindus of Noakhali tried our patience. After a few days we learned that Mahatmaji would come to visit our area of work. This was an important occasion for cleaning up the village and repairing the bridges, thereby making the area habitable. The response of the villagers to this work of community development was most disappointing. They heard our programme with stark indifference. With much effort, we somehow managed to move them around and finally, we put up quite a good show when Gandhiji arrived. Gandhiji was impressed, but he protested against the decorative canopy we had erected.

We found Gandhiji in our midst after a long time. Bengal always had a grievance that Gandhiji was apathetic to her problems. But at this moment of her grave sorrow, he stood by her side sharing the burden of her woes and agony. During his short stay, we accompanied him all the time, for we were afraid we many not get another chance.

At that time, the condition of Noakhali was most depressing. Hindus were in a terrible minority; a few families were scattered far from each other. We feared for their fate in this Muslim majority area. We had no words of advice for them. We shared our problem with Gandhiji. He agreed and said that if the Hindus wished to return, we should stand by their side. If we fail to save them, we shall at least die with them. His sad words expressed his helplessness. A few days ago in our village, a Muslim named Idris Pathari was murdered by another Muslim villager in a quarrel over looted property. They tried to put the blame on our camp as if we had incited the murder. We gave Gandhiji this information. He said, 'You are sure the camp has

nothing to do with it? Then don't worry about what they are saying.' Then he turned to Mridula and with a smile asked, 'You are not afraid of the gallows?'

After the evening prayers, we walked around with Gandhiji. The road was not well paved, so a friend asked me to go ahead and check the road for brambles and stones. I suddenly realised that I was the only one in slippers. I quietly took them off and came and stood beside Gandhiji. My action had not gone unnoticed; he smiled and gently said, 'By taking off your slippers, can you lessen my discomfort?'

We talked of many things along our walk, about his previous visit to Bengal, how he loved the Bengali language and had started learning it. Our thoughts turned to Rabindranath and I commented, 'It's a blessing that he is not alive today. The situation would have pained him sorely.'

Gandhiji agreed, 'You are right. He had a very soft heart. He had visited me during my days of fasting and could not withhold his tears.'

At this time, I felt Gandhiji's loneliness. He seemed to be alone without anyone close to him to share his feelings. Truly, there was no one who could be the companion of his soul. The few who were there had passed away—Mahadev Desai, Kasturba and Rabindranath. In Noakhali he had sent his followers to distant parts of the district, only his granddaughter was by his side. He was surrounded by newspaper reporters all the time. Many of them were known faces I had met in different surroundings. Here they had changed, accompanying Gandhiji all the time, walking with him from village to village, singing hymns and Rabindrasangeet to alleviate his fatigue on the way. I commented with a smile, 'So you all have become Gandhiji's followers!'

Their rejoinder also came with a smile. 'What else can we do in these circumstances?'

Walking with Gandhiji, early in the morning from village to village was a most heartwarming experience. All along the way we sang his favourite songs: 'Jadi tore daak shuney keu na aashey... Tore apon

jone charbey torey... Akbar tora ma boliya daak. (If no one answers your call... When your dear ones leave your side... Call upon Ma with one voice.) Walking by Gandhiji's side from village to village along the dew drenched village path, with the rays of the morning sun on our foreheads and Rabindranath's songs in our hearts, we wished this could go on forever. If we could only walk like this to the summit of human emancipation beyond all earthly greed and sanguinary struggle for power.

TWENTY-TWO

Often we went to other villages beyond our limited area. One day we visited the ruins of Dalal Bazar in Raipura Thana. The huge fortress-like house was burnt to ashes. We learned that they had twelve guns. They were the richest family in Noakhali, but they had run away without offering any resistance. They must have surrendered their guns at the local police station. Many believed that Noakhali could have been save if this family could have resisted the predators. As they escaped, the morale of the land collapsed.

Another evening, we visited Chitta Roy's house in Shaista Nagar. It was almost like a pilgrimage. We picked up a few stones as souvenirs from the place. A few Muslims came forward to show us around the place. They told us how Chittababu had refused to leave his home in the face of danger. The night before the attack, they sat up drawing a list of volunteers who would face the invaders. His wife and children had been taken away by Muslim neighbours to a place of safety in a Muslim home. His aged mother stayed on with him to guard their home. They fought an unequal fight from behind the family temple. When all their bullets were exhausted, and he could find no hope of victory, he killed his mother and companions. Finally, he killed himself, and with him, the last stalwart of Noakhali was gone. The

house was then gutted by fire on all sides. They did not get him alive, but they dismembered his body and threw his head away.

In the falling shades of twilight, strangers came forward from neighbouring houses and related these tales. It seemed as if we were a standing in the midst of ancient ruins of fortresses of days bygone. Who were they talking about? Some Rajput warrior, or Marathi soldier, or some disciple of Guru Govind? We shivered with excitement as Kalida described Chittababu. He was universally known as Kalida in Noakhali and had with him the love and pity of all. I had never met such a lovable person. Kalida had known Chittababu for years. He described him as a very handsome man of thirty five years, bursting with health and energy and enjoying hunting and sports of all kinds. One of us commented, 'How did they live in this deserted place with no one in the neighbourhood?'

Kalida explained, 'So what! They were a large family, and they spent their days happily singing and dancing with the villagers.' We looked at the remnants of the burnt house and tried to imagine a zamindar's palatial house with endless attendants and retainers, buzzing with activity as multitudes of visitors thronged the halls and courtyards. The house was an emblem of affluence and prosperity. Zamindar Chitta Roy seemed to be the last representative of the glorious age of zamindars. He epitomised the honour and dignity of the class, and also offered himself as sacrifice in repentance for all their acts of tyranny and inhumanity that had cast such disrepute on their name. But we are more impressed by Chitta Roy, as the spirited youth from East Bengal bursting with health and courage, whose manhood shirks the idea of running away in fear, who dares to fight a losing battle and finally welcomes death rather than surrender. Such death-defying young men are rare today. But they still exist, and we hear their challenging laughter on Dharmatala Street, on the Calcutta Maidan, or in a village in Noakhali when the country is stunned by this ever familiar image of eternal youth. We returned to our camp with heavy hearts. But there was consolation in our

sorrow. I felt sad as I thought of Chitta Roy's wife and children. I wonder what kind of life they are leading now.

I had to visit Calcutta for a few days to attend the Assembly meeting. As I sat on the cushioned chairs in the air conditioned assembly hall listening to the sophisticated speeches of the honourable members, I felt how totally detached the atmosphere here was from the reality of the nation's problems.

Returning to Noakhali, I turned to constructive social work. Now, our camp was in the southern part of Noakhali around the villages of Tumchar, Charrohita and Charmandal. All the villagers here were from the lower scheduled caste. Particularly, Charrohita was thickly populated with Namosudras. They were mostly uneducated and simple at heart. Their homes were ransacked and there were numerous cases of forcible religious conversions. Women were dishonoured and often taken away from their homes.

Generally in these villages, girls were given away in marriage in early childhood. Consequently, the village was full of child widows. The rules of widowhood were not strictly followed here, but widow remarriage was unheard of. So without any education, they led long, useless lives. In a way, society was forcing them into lives of vice and disrepute. These girls could be seen standing on the road, decked in tinsel ornaments, with red paint on their lips. Some of these girls came to our classes in the afternoon. Rani, my companion, took one of these girls aside and told her how odd she looked with red painted lips. The girl was moved and immediately went and washed her mouth.

One day, a mother came with her daughter. She lamented that she had not been able to give her daughter any scope for learning. The girl, named Matangini, spoke out sullenly with a frown on her face, 'I know nothing.' She was almost in tears. Her mother commented, 'See how angry she is? But she knows how to write her name.' We asked her to come regularly to our classes in the camp. She retorted angrily, 'How can I? I am chained to my cage. Ask her what sort of man she has got me married to!'

Her mother had nothing to say. A dark complexioned daughter of a poor widowed mother, we could easily guess what sort of husband she had found. But the girl showed signs of sharp intelligence and spirited bearing. In a better environment, she might have become an outstanding person. There was no chance of that in the dark corners of her caged life. There she would only suffer, or find a path of escape into a darker life outside.

Girls here had pretty names—Udaytara, Mohanbanshi, Shyamageeta. Shyamageeta was a remarkable girl. She was a dark-skinned girl of twelve or thirteen with beautiful doe-like eyes and a charming, shapely face. She bore herself with dignity and her words were marked with a streak of intelligence. She was quick at learning the alphabet and had a well tuned musical voice. We wished we could take her away with us, for she really deserved a better future. Maya Gupta, a Congress worker who had worked here had left her mark on Shyamageeta's bearing and had taught her to sing 'We are now awake! You 'videshi' leave our land.'

We used to read out the newspapers to the villagers when they visited us. We warned them about the dangers still lurking around and told them to stand united in the face of attacks. 'If they attack your home again, what will you do this time?'

'This time, we'll fight with all our might. We will die before we let them enter our homes.' We were impressed by their spirited replies.

As a social worker, I was always interested in opening schools. The words of Romesh's aunt in Sarat Chandra's novel, *Palli Samaj*, always came to my mind. 'Light up the lamps; then they will know by themselves the good from the bad.'

In the afternoon, we had classes for the women and in the evening we had night school for men. They were tired and exhausted after long hours of work in the fields, but our enthusiasm drew them into the schoolroom where, in the dim light of the lantern, they learned the alphabet. Some of them were quick at picking up spelling and soon learned to write letters. Others were slow with age and tried our patience. But we felt sorry for them, and kept on encouraging them.

Some were good with numbers and covered their deficiency in letters by working out all their sums correctly.

We found no school for children in the village of Charmandal. We were told that there was a government-aided school, but it did not function as the teacher was always absent. After much searching, we found the teacher who, in response to our queries, said, 'The school board pays me only thirteen rupees. I cannot work on that. The village folk had promised to help me with subscriptions, but they have failed to keep their word. I won't be able to teach anymore.' A salary of thirteen rupees was really shocking. But we argued, 'When you don't teach your classes, why do you take the money every month?' The teacher immediately handed in a resignation letter.

We were then in a fix. Where would we get another teacher for thirteen rupees? We decided to volunteer as teachers for the time being. We found a priest and a village 'kaviraj' who agreed to teach the students for one hour every day. We had to leave before the school started, but the schoolroom was repaired and benches were made using the trunks of betel nut trees. Later we learned that the school was functioning and the villagers were contributing towards the teacher's salary.

TWENTY-THREE

We were still in Noakhali when we read Mountbatten's speech of 3rd June in the newspaper. There was greater assurance about India's freedom, which, to our delight, was now brought within narrower realms of possibility. We had already steeled our minds to the acceptance of partition, both of India and Bengal. But our hearts were heavy with sorrow and despair. The idea of a divided Bengal was becoming impossible to bear as we stood on the ravaged soil of Noakhali. We could not look at the faces of the local people. They all bore an expression of silent, helpless reproach as if they were accusing us of betraying them. Heartbroken, I wanted to hold them in my arms and call out to them, 'No, no, we are not leaving you. We cannot leave you, for are we not tied by eternal bonds of brotherhood? Have we not always been together? Are we not at integral part of you?'

I thought of our own native town of Chittagong. We had little contact with the place, for Father always worked in Calcutta, so we hardly ever went there. But from our infancy, we grew up listening to tales about Chattagram. We had not seen our grandparents, but mother taught us their names, and whenever we were asked about our native home, we would childishly lisp 'Chattagram'. Maybe because we lived away that our attraction for our homeland was greater.

As we grew up, we loved to hear Father relate stories of his childhood days. Father was most fond of describing his own father. He used to say, 'I found in my father all that was great and noble in our ancient culture.'

A story we often heard about our grandfather was how, on a stormy night, he had left his six-year-old son alone at home and gone forth to help neighbours in distress. Besides, there was in Father's heart a secret source of pain and repentance, for he had in his early youth left Grandfather's faith and embraced the Brahmo religion and also married into a Brahmo family. This action had deeply hurt his father, though he had never given any expression to his disapproval. At a social gathering in an uncle's home, Father was treated like an outcast and served dinner separately. Grandfather was distressed by this action. Later, the uncle relented and apologised profusely. He explained, 'I was just trying to frighten him into foregoing his decision of becoming a Brahmo.' Grandfather's broadmindedness was indeed unusual in those early days.

After growing up, we went to visit our native home with our father for the first time. There we realised that our love for the country was not one-sided. Our kinsfolk who lived in our native home in the village of Saroatali also gave us a heartfelt welcome. Father was treated with great respect and love. Many of the neighbours remembered Father as a young boy. He also recalled many incidents from the past. When Chand Mia, our neighbour's son, came and bowed to father, he remembered how he would visit their home as a young boy and drink a glass full of milk. 'They had many good cows,' he recollected.

Our relatives had a grievance against us for not coming more often to visit them. We promised to come again, and said, 'We did not know our native home was so beautiful, nor did we know that such a warm welcome was waiting for us! We will surely come again.'

Father took us around to see the sights of the place—Chandranath Hills, Sahasradhara, Seeta Kunda, Bara Kunda, even the estuary of River Karnafuli at Barkhal. We were sad at the time of leaving. It was

like leaving a good old friend. True, we did not live there, but it was our fatherland where generations of our ancestors had lived before us. This land, our fatherland, was more precious than gold.

I resolved mentally to visit Chattagram more often after the partition. I had a debt to pay to my fatherland. I read in the papers that the task of dividing the state was relegated to the Assembly members. So I would have to return to Calcutta before the session.

There were plans of visiting Sandwip before our return. The tiny island lying neglected in this corner of Bengal had been the centre of many communal outbursts. When they saw us, the dwellers of this island came out with many grievances, but at the same time they were glad to have us in their midst. We spent four happy days with them, visiting villages, listening to their problems, and giving them advice and assurance.

At the same time, I was extremely worried about returning to Calcutta in time for the Assembly session. Because of inclement weather in this area, all postal connections were cut off and no newspapers or letters were reaching us from outside. I had a feeling that there would be an early session because of the emergency situation.

I had no previous idea of the difficulties of communication between the island of Sandwip and the rest of the country. If I had known, then I would not have come to this place with an urgent meeting pending. The first day when we went to the boat that would take us to the steamer, we found huge waves all around and a dark nor'wester looming in the western sky. I begged the boatman, 'Yusuf Bhai, can't you take us to the steamer?' We got onto the boat when he agreed, but our companions were frightened and kept on warning the boatman about following a woman's advice and taking an unnecessary risk. I was enraged by this gender-based attack, but could find no counter argument to put my male companions down. I went on grumbling silently about cowardly companions.

On the first day we missed the steamer and returned home dripping wet. The next day, we went to Barisal by steamer and from there boarded the train for Calcutta. On the steamer, I came across

an M.L.A. from the Muslim League, also on his way to attend the Assembly session which was scheduled to be held on the 20th of the month. It was the 17th, and we would just make it to Calcutta. I asked my friends what they thought of a woman's intuition. I had an uproarious homecoming when I reached Calcutta. There was a lot of anxiety and suspicion about my absence from the city. A rumour was going around that I had taken lakhs of rupees as bribe for abstaining from the voting. Father was terribly upset and had sent my brother to Noakhali to bring me back. Numerous letters and telegrams had been mailed to my address in Noakhali, but none of them reached me at Sandwip because the postal department was not functioning. I asked my father angrily, 'Why do you pay heed to false rumours? You know money is a matter of no consequence to me. Why do you get disturbed over something you know to be totally false?' Father replied, 'You may not be afraid, but I am your father.'

On returning to Calcutta, we were faced with the important question of what to do now that India was on the verge of freedom. Work appeared to be more difficult now, the work of building up a free nation. Where should we start? What should be our policy? We asked each other, but no one was sure of the answer. Doubtless, we all wanted socialism, but how was one to achieve it? There seemed to be no clarity in anyone's mind about the path. I told my friends, 'The problem is everyone is speaking of socialism—Saratbabu, Prafullababu, Surenbabu, Shibnathbabu—but they are all at loggerheads!'

A friend corrected me, 'Why are you leaving out Surhawardy's name? He is also speaking of socialism. Don't you read *Ittehad*?' But how long could we go on with the trickery of words! A bold, positive stand was now of utmost importance. It was high time we stopped playing with words. I appreciated the statement issued by Shankar Rao Deo, the Congress secretary. He said, 'Our political work is now over. We must now turn to a revolutionary programme of social reconstruction.'

Our position as Congress workers was most difficult. We had promised, on behalf of the Congress, a 'Kisan Mazdoor Raj' for the

people. We had assured the people that the transference of power meant transference of power to the people of India. But today, on the day of fulfilment of the promise, we found so many obstacles in our way. Problems that we had brushed aside for all these years now loomed large. The 'new generation' in my family had little faith in the Congress. My nieces were working with the Socialist Party; they were organising 'Kisan Sanghas' in the villages of 24 Parganas near Ballygunge. They were working with much faith and devotion. But we differed on our assessment of the Congress. Their opinion was, 'The Congress shelters the zamindars and the moneyed class—in the villages, we have to fight them in our work for the *kisans*. So it is not possible for us to work for the Congress.'

For so long had I argued that they were being unfair to the Congress. The Congress belonged to the people, and it could not survive without the support of the poor. A historical analysis also showed how there had always been a struggle within the Congress between the rich and the poor, and how the poorer section of the country was gradually gaining more prominence and the moneyed class was receding.

But the problem was imminent, and the time for verbal debate was over. The Congress now stood face to face with fiery issues of reality. If it could come out unscathed and successful, then it would stand as a glorious embodiment of strength. If not, then this great organisation would be shattered into a thousand pieces by the explosive conflicts of the diverse interests vested in this ancient country of ours. It was indeed a critical moment in the lives of Congressmen, almost a life and death situation.

For the time being we tried to stop the voice of criticism, 'Let us wait for the 15th of August; let us see how the constitution is framed. Days of trial for the Congress lie ahead, when day after day, month after month, year after year the Congress will have to prove itself in the eyes of the people. There its true role will become clear, and with time, the Congress will earn the respect and trust of the nation.'

But in the meantime, we were depressed by stray incidents that came to our notice. One day, while reading the newspaper, my brother remarked, 'Have you noticed what pay scale they have decided for the governor? Won't you raise your voice against it?' What could we do? I remembered Gandhiji's letter to the viceroy at the time of the Dundee movement. 'In no other country there exists such disparity of income between the topmost executive and the common people as in India.' Was it not the right time to put an end to such incongruity of income?

My brother went on complaining, 'I don't like this one bit. I don't wish to have anything to do with the 15th of August festivities. The flag of freedom will be hoisted on all government buildings and offices by government officials and magistrates. By the same people who had insulted and humiliated the flag during the struggle. Just imagine, the S.P. who shot down Matangini Hazra during the blockade of Tamluk Thana will now stand in that same *thana* to hoist the flag! Have you ever heard of such insults to the memory of heroes and martyrs of any other nation? Shouldn't this task be entrusted to political sufferers or revolutionary leaders?'

I had nothing to say in reply. I remained mute with a heavy heart. My thoughts went back to those days of struggle when Matangini Hazra, with a flag in her hand, wounded by the policeman's bullet, still kept calling out, 'Onwards, friends! Move onwards!' Then, charged by more bullets, she succumbed with the flag still held high in her right hand!

I remembered the tortures inflicted on political workers by the police officers of the Special Branch and Intelligence Branch. Battery charges, the whiplash, forcible icepacks and numerous other methods of torture came to my mind. I admit, this was no time for personal revenge, but was it right to give so much importance to these watchdogs of the British Empire, the minions who helped them flourish by sucking the lifeblood out of our poverty stricken millions? Will this not weaken the framework of free India? How will these self-serving, spineless men interact with the martyrs who

had sacrificed everything for the sake of freedom? Won't the edifice of free India collapse under the strain of such contrasting interests?

My brother also pointed out how army officers who had participated in the World War, disobeying the Congress call for boycott by becoming officers of the King's Commission and sporting fancy cars, were now being asked to give the guard of honour as the flag of India's independence would be hoisted on the fifteenth. And where were those dedicated soldiers of freedom who had made lifelong sacrifices for the cause of liberty? Maybe some, like the young worker Kamal, were lying on their sick bed; some were wasting their lives aimlessly on the streets, while others forgotten by all were lost in the darkness of oblivion.

Again, I imagined Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru calling out to all the soldiers of freedom to come forward and raise the flag of a free nation in all the cities and towns of the country.

I consoled my brother, 'Those soldiers of freedom who have sacrificed their all for the nation can very well do without the honours handed out today. Their greatest glory is 'the crown of thorns' woven by their suffering and sacrifice at the altar of liberty. They desire nothing more.'

But the task of building the new nation should be in the hands of men who placed the interest of the nation above their own. Let us hope for such a future. History is always in the making, and our struggle for a truly free country will not be over easily.

TWENTY-FOUR

I started writing on the 8th of July, and today it is the 10th of August. My work is almost done. I do not like what I see as I turn the pages over. Why did I ever sit down to write, I wonder? I find a sense of incompleteness in my words. I have failed to give expression to my innermost pain and unfulfilled dreams and hopes. I seem to have described only the external and superficial aspect of my life, which would have been better left unsaid.

I do not know what I wanted when I sat down to write. Was I aiming at a final adieu? Did I wish to bid farewell to my field of work, to the endless movement of the chariot wheels of life? Truly, at times a sense of tiredness comes over my mind and body, and I feel worn out and exhausted.

But my Creator will not let me rest. Moments of my life are still being enriched with wonderful, life-fulfilling emotions. The wealth of happiness, the nectar of eternal life impel me onwards to a fuller course of action. I dare not turn my face from this continuous flow of benediction.

I had started my life's journey with the laments of mankind's suffering in my ears. Human suffering continues unabated. All around us we still hear the groans of the hungry and the agonies of the deprived. Time for rest is still far off. We cannot think of leisure.

Today my only prayer is to remain active in the cause of suffering humanity and not lose myself in the idle morass of inactivity. May I have the strength till the last day of my life to say along with the poet,

Maha bidrohi rono-klanto,
Aami shei deen hono shanto,
Jobé utpiritér krondon role
Aakashé batashé dhonibéna
Atyacharir khargo kripan
Bheem rono bhumé ronibé na

(Though wearied by action
I shall not rest today,
Only when the cries of mankind
Shall cease renting the heavens,
Only when the tyrants sword
Shall stop its cruel fight
Then only shall I rest.)

My journey is not over. My heart still beats to the sound of my Creator's drum, 'Onward, onward! Ever forward.'