

Amar Jiban (My Life)

Introduction¹

This book is written by a woman. On top of that, it is written by an old woman who is eighty-eight years of age. I started to read it, therefore, with great curiosity. I had decided to mark out all the important passages with my pencil. As I went on reading, however, I found that the whole book was getting scored over with pencil marks. The events of her life are, indeed, so surprising, and her writing carries such sincere and simple sweetness, that it is impossible to put it down before one has finished it.

Her autobiography reveals that she is, indeed, an exemplary woman. Her domestic skills match her piety and her love for God. As a child she used to be excessively full of fears. Her mother then gave her a sacred formula to help her fight them. That formula has protected her all her life like some magical amulet. Her mother had said; "Whenever you are afraid, call out to Dayamadhav."² Since then, in times of sorrow, distress, (fear or danger, she has always found comfort in this name. We hear a lot these days about the importance of religious education. In truth, the mother just needs to sow the seed of religious thought in the tender heart of the child in her infancy. The wonderful results that follow cannot be matched even by reading hundreds

of religious texts later in life. Another characteristic of her life is her tremendous keenness for education.

She never got a chance to be educated. In those days, learning was thought to be a vice in women. She learnt to read and write with tremendous effort, all by herself. It was her religious quest that inspired her to educate herself. It was not to read plays and novels—but to read a religious manuscript, to read *Chaitanya Bhagabat*,³ that she was so keen on learning. Her religion is not a matter of external ritual, rites and ceremonies, it is a living, spiritual religion. She sees the hand of God, she feels his mercy, she depends on him in every event of her life. Truly, she is immersed in God. It is extremely unusual to come across such an elevated, exalted religious life. In our country, we worship images of God. It is not exactly idolatry, since the image is taken to symbolise God. Its worship, therefore, lacks the narrowness of idolatry. Christians castigate Hindus for being idolaters; Hindus, however, worship images in quite a different spirit. This becomes clear from the instruction that she received from her mother:

“Then I asked my mother: “Ma! How could Dayamadhav hear our cries from the shrine at home?” Mother said: “He is the Great Lord, he is everywhere, so he can hear everything. He listens to everyone. The Great Lord has created all of us. Wherever and however people call out to him, he will listen. If you call out in a loud voice, he will hear you, if you call out in a small voice, he will listen. That is why he is not a mere mortal, he is the Great Lord.” Then I said: “Ma! Everyone talks of the Great Lord. Does he belong to us?”⁴ My mother said: “That Great Lord belongs to all, everyone calls out to him, he is the first and the only Creator. He has created everything that the world contains, he loves everyone, he is everybody’s Great Lord.””

Can there be an idea of God that is more advanced than this? Every household ought to possess a copy of this book. Few books are as satisfying as this one.

20 Jaistha
Ballygunge

Jyotirindranath Tagore

Initial Sacred Rite

My salutations to Mother Saraswati.⁵ You are the dispenser of
strength and wisdom
All terrestrial beings obey you
Be charitable towards me. Come and reside within my heart
I will adore you as well as I can.
I am but an insensible, weak daughter. Lend me some grace of yours
So that my wishes are fulfilled
I shall hope and pray. That along with your beloved husband
You will come to reside in my throat.⁶



First Composition



Account of My Life

Where are you, Lord of the universe, Lord who fulfils all wishes
Come into my heart, grant me mine.
I am an ignorant, mean creature, Moreover, I am but a mere woman
How will I ever learn to sing your praises?
Still, I yearn to chant your name
Out of your great mercy, bless Rashsundari.

I was born in the month of Chaitra in the year 1216, and in this year of 1303,⁷ I have completed eighty-eight years of my life. I have spent such a very long time in this Bharatbarsha since I came here.

This body, this mind, this very life of mine, have taken on several different forms. I do not entirely remember what they were like at different times, nor do I recall how my days went by, or how long I lived in different places. I recount whatever little comes back to me.

I remember nothing at all about the states of my body and the moods of my mind until I was four or five. My mother knows it all. I do remember a little bit about the time when I was six or seven, and I will talk about it here. I used to play with our neighbourhood girls. They often beat me up for no reason at all. I was so full of fear that I would not cry, but my tears would flow silently. I cried partly because of the great pain, but more out of a fear that my folks would scold and abuse them if they came to know of this. I also cried because I remembered a certain conversation. My mother had told me that I should not go anywhere on my own. When I asked her why, she had said: "Child lifters are on the prowl these days, they steal any child that they can lay their hands on and they take them away in a sack." When I heard this I was terrified, my face fell. My mother hurriedly gathered me up in her arms and started to comfort me: "Don't be scared. Child lifters pick up only those wicked kids who beat up other children. What do you have to fear, they won't touch you."

Those words had stayed with me. Whenever a kid gave me a thrashing, I would recall them, I would remember that my mother had told me that child lifters take away kids who beat up others. That was why I would never cry out, I would only shed silent tears, thinking fearfully that they might be taken away by the child lifter. Nor would I ever report the beating. On the contrary, I was scared that someone might hear me cry. So it got around that it was safe to beat me, it would never

be reported. Everyone took to beating me up secretly, I was terrified of all the girls.

One day a girl came to me and said: "Ask your mother to make up some snacks for us, let us go and have a dip in the Ganga". Delighted, I told my mother: "Ma, I am going off to bathe in the Ganga."

She smiled and said: "What do you want for that?" I said, "Make up a pack for me." I had no idea what such a bath meant, I only knew that it involved having some snacks on the way and walking to the river with a bundle on the head.⁸

My mother understood and she packed up some snacks and a couple of mangoes in a bundle. My happiness was beyond description. It was as if I had been given a priceless treasure. Much happier events do occur these days, but they no longer bring such pleasure. What delightful days were those! I set off with that girl and with the bundle. On the way, we sat down beside a pond and opened the pack. My companion said: "Let's make believe that you are the mother and I am your child. Take me on your lap and feed me." I asked her to sit close to me and I fed her all my food. Then she said: "Wash my hands now". That put me in a fix. I didn't know what to do, I could not fetch the water even when I got into the pond. The girl slapped me, I began to tremble in fear and my tears flowed. I hurriedly wiped my eyes and looked around, hoping that nobody had seen us.

At that point, another friend came upon us. She scolded the girl: "What kind of a person are you? You ate up her food, you had both her mangoes, and now you are beating her up and making her cry! I am going to tell her mother." She went home to report this, and then she came back and said: "I have told your mother. Let's see what she does to this girl". I burst into nervous tears. Then my travelling companion gave

me another smack on the face and exclaimed: "She is like a precious mirror," she bursts into tears at the drop of a hat!" My fears increased, I began to wonder as I wiped away my tears: "What has happened to me that I have become a precious mirror?" I anxiously thought that the child lifter would now come and take us both away. I did not go home because of such worries, I went back to my companion's place. Her mother asked her: "Why is her face flushed? Did you make her cry?" My friend kept laughing as her mother scolded her. When her mother went away, she said: "See, I did not cry when my mother was scolding me! Why are you such a spoilt cry baby? Will you tell your mother all about this?" I said, "No, I'll say nothing." I sat there gloomily till I was fetched back home. I found everybody laughing about me and my travelling tales. The elders decided that I shouldn't play with other girls. I would stay at home. Those days, girls were not educated as they are these days. We had a vernacular school in our own home. A memsahib taught there.¹⁰ Next morning, my uncle took me there. I was wearing a long black skirt, with a scarf wrapped around me.¹¹ I would be rooted to the very spot where I would be set down, too terrified to move. I was eight years old at that time. I cannot say what I looked like, I can only repeat what others said of me:

My complexion was most bright
My figure matched it in beauty
My limbs were exquisite
People called me a golden doll.

I would talk to no one as I used to lisp, and everybody found it funny. I would be terrified if someone called out to me loudly, one had only to say something to me in a loud voice and I would burst into tears. So everybody was gentle

with me. I would spend the entire day at school, I did not have to stay indoors like other girls. Those days, boys used to scratch out letters from the alphabet on the loose earth on the ground and then they would loudly recite them.¹² Since I was with them, I got to know many of these letters. It was fashionable to learn Persian those days. I even got to learn some of that. No one came to know that I had picked up anything. I would stay there all day long, coming inside only to bathe and to eat at midday, and then, in the evening, I would be fetched inside. The rest of the day was spent with the memsahib. I cannot sort out the feelings of those days, it was as if terror enveloped my mind. If anything else chanced to sprout there at all, fear would at once clamp down on it.



Second Composition



Praise, much praise to thee, my Lord, you are blessed in all the three worlds

How much praise can this single mouth utter?

Your mercy is blessed, blessed are your rules

Blessed is the illusion with which you enfold the world.

Blessed are your marvellous ways

Blessed are the stars, the sun, this earth

Blessed are the beasts, the birds, the trees.

The world is radiant with such dazzling beauty

The wind blows so gentle and cool

Hundreds of rivers flow along their divine courses

I fail to describe the fragrance the air carries

Rashsundari's birth is blessed

Your sacred name permeates her touch, her hearing.

One day, as my uncle was taking me outside, a cow doctor appeared before us, a sack in his hands. I took him to be the child lifter and I nearly died of terror. I covered my eyes and began to shake convulsively. People started to laugh and to comfort me. My uncle carried me inside and teased me: "We were nearly snatched away by the child lifter today."

I went straight to my mother and started to cry. She hugged me and said: "Why do you fear everything? There is nothing to fear, there is no child lifter, all that is nonsensical. We have our Dayamadhav, why should you fear anything? Whenever you are afraid, call out to him, and your fears will be gone." Those were encouraging words. I told myself, mother tells me that there is no child lifter, and our Dayamadhav is there for us. The thought brought some relief. Still, I would never venture out anywhere by myself, there would always be someone with me. Really, there was no child as nervous as I. Even the sight of old people struck terror into my heart, I could never be left to myself. I had an aunt who had been widowed very early, before I could be aware of it. One day, I asked her: "Auntie, where are your conch-shell bangles and your jewellery, why don't you wear them?"¹³ She told me, "I am not yet married, that's why." I believed her. Since then, I thought that all the widows around me were actually unmarried women.¹⁴ I had lost my father at the age of four, I knew nothing about that. One day, as I was sitting with the memsahib, a gentleman asked my uncle about me: "Ray Mahasay!¹⁵ Are you brightening up this place with this precious and beautiful thing? Whose daughter is she?" My uncle said: "She is Padmalochan Ray's daughter." The information worried me no end. So far I had believed that I was my mother's daughter, and, moreover, I had thought that my mother was not yet married. I brooded over this and then I asked my mother, "Ma, whose daughter

am I?" She smiled, but she would not give me a reply.¹⁶ Then I went and asked my aunt. Much to my surprise, she began to cry. I was bewildered, I could not fathom the reason for her tears. She restrained herself after a while, took me upon her lap and exclaimed: "Alas, Lord, how cruel you are to this child, depriving her of her father's love! Don't you know, child, that you are the daughter of Padmalochan Ray?" I kept quiet, but my mind was in a painful whirl. Eventually I asked: "Auntie, how am I his daughter?" She laughed at that and said: "There never was such a foolish child as this one. Listen, your father had married your mother, that's why you are his daughter."

My worries grew. Thinking hard, I asked again: "Where is he then?" Aunt said: "Child, don't bring back those old sorrows, he is dead." I was terrified at the mention of death. I told myself, mother advised me to call out to Dayamadhav if I am afraid. If the dead man comes to me, I shall call out to him. That settled my worries a bit.

I had a brother two years older than me and another one who was two years younger. When all three of us were quite small, a fire broke out one night at a neighbour's place. There was a large bare field near our house, it had no houses or trees on it. A river flows quite near the field. As the fire started raging, people began to take out all the stuff from the burning house and to dump it in the field. The three of us were also taken there. The fire was blazing fiercely, people were screaming and sobbing, bamboo poles were loudly bursting into flames. We were crying by ourselves. When the fire spread to our house and the flames were rekindled, we felt as if we, too, were going to be burnt alive. We ran away from the field, occasionally looking back to see if the fire was still raging. We were gripped with panic.

We reached the river bank where the cremation ground

was located. It was strewn with bedposts, mattresses, pillows, sheets, logs of wood and stacks of bamboo poles. The whole place was deserted. My elder brother said, "Look, this is the cremation ground, all this stuff is the bedding that comes with corpses."¹⁷

At the mention of corpses, I felt as if terror was sucking me in, drawing me inside its belly.

All three of us began to sob helplessly. Suddenly, I remembered: Mother had told me to call out to Dayamadhav in times of fear. I told my brothers to do that. The three of us began to chant the name of Dayamadhav loudly, weeping all the while. Nobody was there to heed us. The river was on one side of us, on the other side there was the deafening roar of blazing flames. People were screaming and crying, each crying for the other, all of them drowning out our cries. We were, in any case, far away from those people. Our terror was beyond description, we were close to dying of it, we could only stammer out that name.

There was a small settlement on the other side of the river. People had rushed out from there when they saw the fire. At one point in the river, the water level is very low, one can walk across it. They forded it there and came upon us, drawn by our sobs. One of them said, "Ah, these kids must be from the house of the Rays. The house is on fire, that's why they are crying." They picked us up and carried us home, comforting us all the way.

In the meantime, our folks could not find us. They decided that we must have died in the fire. They had flung themselves on the ground, siezed by violent grief. When these people brought us in, grief turned into great joy and they began to dance around us. Since they had thought that we had died in the fire, they had not bothered to pull any of our belongings

out of the flames, so everything in the house had been burnt to ashes. But nobody had any regrets, so happy were they to get us back. Our neighbours put us up for the night. In the morning we came back to our ruined home and wandered around, gazing at the heaps of burnt objects. Even the fruit trees and the vegetables plants—with aubergines, *bel* fruits and bananas growing on them—had been roasted by the flames. Burnt pieces of poles and roofing were mixed up with pieces of pots and pans. The sight filled me with delight. I carried all that burnt stuff away and started to play with it. We have a sort of a ritual that wherever a house is burnt down, an offering of rice pudding is made to the household deity on that spot. So, we, too, got a portion of the pudding. Since at home, a daily ritual offering is also made to Dayamadhav with rice pudding, my younger brother thought it was the same thing. I was the elder sister, so I thought that I understood more than he did. I had decided that the man who had carried us home last night was surely Dayamadhav.

So I told him, "Yes, Dayamadhav does love us well. He carried us home in his own arms." My brother began to mock me: "What on earth are you saying, Elder Sister! Can Dayamadhav be a human being? Does he have a beard?" I insisted: "Mother had told me to take his name in times of fear. Last night we did just that, so he came to bring us back home." My brother said, "That wasn't Dayamadhav, that was a man." I burst into tears. My mother came to us and scolded him; "Why are you making her cry?" When he had told her everything, she began to laugh. She said to me, "Even your younger brother understands all this, don't you have any sense at all? Let me explain." She took me upon her lap and she explained.



Third Composition



I am a foolish creature I don't know how to pray
My mind is poisoned with thoughts of worldly goods
I am so very weak Death comes closer everyday

Lord, it is because I do not get to see you.

Shame and fear wrack me Merciful One, I am in chains
I do not see a way out.

Lord, listen to your slave Come, come into my heart
Merciful One, be kind to me.

You are the tree of mercy You are the ocean of compassion,
teacher to the world

Look upon me with compassionate eyes.

Rashsundari is afloat On a bottomless ocean
She does not have your feet to hold on to.

My mother said to me: "The deity who resides at the shrine at home is called Dayamadhav. The person who had carried you home from the river yesterday is a man." I asked her: "You had told me that I should call out to Dayamadhav whenever I am afraid, for he belongs to us. Last night we were so frightened, we chanted his name so often, why didn't he come himself?" My mother said: "You had cried out his name in fear. He heard you, and he sent a man to rescue you." Then I asked her: "Ma! He stays inside the shrine at home. How could he hear our cries from there?" Mother said: "He is the Great Lord, he is everywhere, so he can hear everything. He listens to everyone."

"The Great Lord has created all of us. Wherever one calls out to him, he listens. If you call out loudly, he will hear you, if you call out in a small voice, he will listen. If you utter his name in your mind, he will still hear you. That is why He is the Great Lord, he is not a mortal being." Then I said: "Ma!

Everyone talks of the Great Lord. Does he belong to us?" My mother said: "Yes, he belongs to everyone. Everybody calls out to him, he is the one and the only Creator. He has created everything in this world, he loves everybody, he is the Great Lord of us all."

So far I had no idea about the Great Lord. I only knew that everybody talks of him. My mother now explained that he is our God, he sees into our hearts. Those words gave me much strength. That day, the first seed of intelligence was planted in me for I came to know that the Great Lord and our deity are one. My mind was comforted by the thought that he listens if one utters his name even to oneself. Why should I fear anything, I can always think of him. That word of my mother will never die within me: Mother has said that the Great Lord belongs to us.

The sacred word that came from my mother went straight into my heart. I used to play with the girls till I was eight years old. The next two years I had sat with the memsahib. Ten years had passed that way. Then there was a fire at home, the school was destroyed. That meant I could no longer come out of the inner quarters. My mother's brother had lost his home, so my mother brought over his little son into our house. I was very pleased with this, all day I would carry him around in my arms and play with him. He, too, became extremely fond of me. I took over his bathing, his feeding. I would never let him cry.

A distant uncle had his home close to our place. An aunt stayed there. I spent all my days there with the little boy. There were few people in that house, only the three uncles, that aunt and some children. Auntie used to suffer from a kind of gout, but she still had to do all the housework. I would always hear her groan: "I wish I could die, all this work is too much for me."

I felt so sorry for her! Even though I did not know how to

do that work, I said to her: "Why don't you rest, I'll do all your work for you." She said: "How will you do it, I have never seen you do anything. Also, your folks will scold me if I make you work." I told her: "No one will know, you show me how to do it, I'll do everything."

Then she began to instruct me and I began to follow her words. I was delighted to do her work for her. Gradually, I learnt to do everything. I would make all the preparations for her cooking, she would sit and cook, and I would watch her. Soon, I learnt to cook. I began to cook all their meals. No one at home knew anything of this. Since my aunt was so fond of me, I spent all my time with her.

Some time passed in this way. As I sat oiling her hair one morning, my own aunt came over to visit her. I went and hid inside as soon as I saw her. She asked: "Child, why do you hide?" The other aunt said, "She was oiling my hair, so she was embarrassed to see you." My aunt laughed and picked me up. She asked: "So you know some work now, who has taught you?" The other aunt said: "The child is really a good worker. I can hardly move around, my gout bothers me so. She is doing all my work. She has brought me new life." My aunt was so pleased that she carried me home in her arms and said: "Did you know, this child knows how to do all the housework! Our sister-in-law in the house over there is suffering from gout, so she does all her work, she even cooks their meals." Folks at home were most pleased about it. My mother's happiness knew no bounds. She said: "Little Mother, show us what you can do." From that day, I took over all the work at home. They did not want me to work, but I would still do it on my own, without telling anyone. This pleased them so much that I became everybody's darling. From that day, my days of play were over. I played no more. I only worked.

I learnt all about housework. For two whole years I would spend all my days at that aunt's, with the little boy at my side. We were so fond of each other. However, he died suddenly and tragically, leaving me desolate. I was twelve years old. So far, my time had passed happily. I had lived in joy among my folks, close to my mother's arms.

Clouds were gathering, nonetheless. I got married when I was twelve. I had not an inkling about what was going to happen. One day I had gone for a bath at the pond behind our house. There were a lot of people around. Someone looked at me and said: "Whoever gets this girl will be blessed, it will be the crowning of all desire." Another person said: "So many people are already eager to take her away immediately, but her mother doesn't allow it." Yet another one exclaimed: "How can she hold her back, sooner or later her mother will have to give her away, otherwise why was she born a girl?"

I was stunned when I heard this, I was oppressed by a sense of dread. I went home and asked my mother: "Ma! If someone asks for me, will you give me away?" Mother said: "Hush! Who told you that? Who will I give you away to, how will I give you away?" She went into her room, wiping away her tears. When I saw that my mother was weeping, my heart nearly stopped, I was sure that my mother would give me away. Pain tore at my heart. I began to wonder, what has happened, where will she send me away?

The thought obsessed me. I brooded over it endlessly, I felt deeply depressed, I lost all joy in living. Sobs racked me day and night, I would not talk to anyone, I did not feel like eating or working. I would call out to the Great Lord in my heart. Tears never stopped. Even though my health broke down, I kept all my sorrows to myself, only the Great Lord knew what was going on in my mind. I had long heard people talk of

marriage, I knew everyone got married, but I knew nothing of what it actually involved. Now everyone told me that I would soon be married off. My folks had always cared for me deeply, but now they were affectionate as never before. I was made much of.

All that started to work on me and to cheer me up. The wedding would take place, music would be played, women would ululate. It was going to be fun. Nonetheless, I kept worrying. The house began to fill up, all sorts of things started flowing in. Our kinsfolk began to arrive. At this, my fears came back, I stopped talking, I took to crying all day long. Everyone comforted me, cuddled me, but a nameless pain would not leave me for a minute.

Merriment increased at home. The day before the wedding, I looked at the red silk sari, the jewellery, the music. I forgot all my dread, I began to move about happily, wreathed in smiles. After the wedding was over, people came to my mother the next morning and asked her: "Will they leave today?" I thought all the new guests would be going away. The music started up again.

I began to move around with my mother without a worry in my head. The house became very crowded. I saw that some looked happy but others were crying. I was startled. By and by, my brothers, my uncles, my aunt came to me, hugged me close and started to weep. My tears started again, now I knew that my mother was surely going to send *me* away. I clung to her and said: "Ma! please don't send me away." The crowd around me began to weep and to comfort me. My mother put her arms around me and said: "You are my own little mother, you are my goddess of Fortune, try to understand, don't be scared, the Great Lord is with you. You'll be back soon. Everyone has to go away to their in-laws, they don't mind so much, why are

you so upset? Try and be calm.” By then, I was petrified, my whole body was trembling uncontrollably, I was speechless. I forced myself to speak through my tears: “Ma! Will the Great Lord come with me?” Mother said: “Of course, he will, he will be with you, do not cry.” Nothing that she said took away my dread, my tears.

People had to make a great effort to snatch me away from her arms. I was seized with such violent grief at that moment! The memory still fills me with pain. Is it not a great tragedy that one has to go away to a foreign land, leaving one’s mother, one’s near and dear ones behind, to live under lifelong bondage? But such is the will of God, so let us praise the custom.

I clung hard to whoever came to pull me away. I cried and cried. Everyone wept at the sight. They did not bring a second palanquin for me but, very tenderly, they put me into the same one.¹⁸ As soon as I was inside, it started to move. I was all by myself, not a single familiar face came with me. I felt that I had been plunged into a sea of danger. Helplessly, I pleaded within my heart: “Great Lord, be with me,” and I cried as I said it. At the time of the annual worship of the Goddess Durga or of Shyama, when the sacrificial goat is dragged towards the altar, it cries for its mother, abandoning all hope. I was crying exactly the same way. My one thought was: Mother had told me, when you are afraid, think of the Great Lord.

As I thought, I cried, and as I cried my throat choked up. By and by, I had not even the strength to weep.



Fourth Composition



Lord of this universe Who supports and pervades the world
Who rules over the entire Creation

I am immersed in sorrows I have lost my mother's arms
I call out to you in great fear.
I do not see my friends I cannot wait to see them again
My heart is convulsed with terror.
When I longed for my mother You took me into your own arms
You filled up her place for me.
It was then that I learnt to yearn for you To offer up all my devotion
To think of you incessantly.
You were always ready with shelter To soothe away the tears
To grant me my desires.
You have always been there To save me from distress
To help me cross over all dangers.
Your mercy has been incomparable Shame on me forever
That I do not recall any of that.

Even the tears would not come any more. I began to drown in a heavy slumber. I cannot recall where we went after this.

When I woke up the next morning, I found myself on a boat, surrounded by complete strangers. There was not a single familiar face at my side. Where did I leave behind my mother, my family, all the neighbours of my village who had been so fond of me, my playmates? Where was I going, all by myself? These thoughts pierced my heart as I sobbed. The people on the boat tried to comfort me, but their affectionate words only brought back memories of my own people. My tears flowed faster, until I was nearly choking, and then, at last, they stopped, exhausted. Since I had never been on a boat before, I began to feel a little sick. All hope fled. Following my mother's words, I once again began to chant the name of the Great Lord.

Alas, what dangerous times were those! Only the One who saves us from danger would know, no one else had any idea.

Even now I sometimes think back on those days.

The bird was thrust behind the cage, the fish fell into the net.

However, that was His will, one cannot question it. I can only describe what I had felt at that time. Who knows what other girls go through, maybe not all of them suffer as much. One can hardly see what causes such suffering but the absence of my own people was, indeed, an unbearable grief.

People have fun, taming birds in a cage. I was that caged bird. I was now shut up in a cage and I won't ever be free again for the rest of my life. A few days passed on the boat. One day I heard the people say, today we'll reach home. I suddenly thought that we were returning to my own home, but, of course, I was not thinking straight, full of fears as I was. The Great Lord alone knows the thoughts that passed through my mind, words cannot describe them. An endless flow of tears were their only outward sign.

Ah, my Lord, King of this universe! Let me sing your praises a hundred times, let me thank you for your laws. Where have you brought me, away from my dearest mother, my beloved friends? That night we left the boat and went to their house. It was full of so many different kinds of people, everyone was having such fun! Not one of them was from my own land, not one face did I know. My heart was broken, I was inconsolable, my tears would not stop. People began to comfort me: "Do not cry. This is your new home, these are your new relatives, they will now belong to you, so why do you cry? Now you will have to make your home here, live your life in this place." Whatever few hopes I still had about getting back to my own people were now finally crushed. My mind was scorched with the flames of grief. Those who have gone through the same suffering will, perhaps, not use such words as comfort. The same thing happens when a mother loses her son. Quite often people come and tell her:

"Who are you crying for, he wasn't your son, he was an enemy from many previous births, otherwise he wouldn't have left you. Don't even think of that evil one!"

Do such words ever bring any consolation? That is impossible, the mind never finds any comfort in them. They only stoke our grief all the more, just as pushing bales of straw into the flames makes them blaze forth. My heart filled with terror when I listened to them. Helplessly, I recited the name of the Great Lord to myself. There was no other way left to me. My tears were inexhaustible. Then my mother-in-law came and put her arms around me and began to soothe me with her soft words. Praise be to the Lord! What a marvellous way of grafting the bark of a tree onto another.

Her arms reminded me of my mother's, her loving words made me think as if she really was Mother. But they were not at all alike. My own mother was beautiful while my mother-in-law was dark. Nor were their faces alike. Still, her arms comforted me, I could close my eyes to all fear and remember my mother. Actually, I had nothing to fear. These people fussed over me more than my own folks did. They carried me around in their arms all day, my feet never touched the ground. Still, my fears never left me for a moment, I cried and cried. I kept thinking of the Great Lord, I asked him to protect me. My Lord, the merciful one! Now I know that you are infinitely kind! But then I would think of you only because I was afraid, I knew nothing of the glories of your name. I thought of you because my mother had told me to do so. Still, I did think of you, even without understanding your greatness. And that, too, is a sign of your grace.

Whoever calls out to you sincerely in times of trouble
You shower your mercy on him unstintingly.

I stayed there for three months that first time, and I was like a motherless child, mourning all the time. After three months my uncle came and fetched me back. I went straight into my mother's arms and began to sob: "Ma, why did you give me away to a stranger?" My words made everyone laugh. Mother said: "Look, younger girls go through this, but they don't cry so much. Everyone has to live with their in-laws, when will you get a little wiser, when will the Great Lord send you a modicum of sense? God knows how much you used to cry there." As she was saying these things, however, I was suddenly surrounded by all my friends and playmates. Fears were now forgotten, I was filled with joy and laughter. What a day that was, it is truly beyond description. I would cry so easily and, yet, the Great Lord had also sent so much joy! Now I was completely restored to happiness and I moved around in great delight. At that point I was no longer a child, I was twelve. Those twelve years had passed in a state of ignorance. I still behaved like a child of five. Alas, I was such a fool, I was taken to be an idiot. My uncle did not send me back to the in-laws for a year. I spent that year happily with my mother.¹⁹ But I did have to go back after a year and then I spent two years there.²⁰ I still cried, but I gradually got to know those people a bit, though I never spoke to anybody. All my conversations were with the Great Lord and I thought endlessly about my father's home.²¹ I cried incessantly. I would even look at a bird, a cat or a dog and tell myself that they might have come from there. At my father's home, I was loved very dearly. Daughters are disciplined so sternly, mothers sometime beat them up. Let alone a beating, thank the Lord, nobody had even rebuked me, I was always made much of. When I became a bride I was again bathed in love, I lacked nothing, in fact, I got even more. My mother-in-law heaped toys on me, called in the children

of that village to be with me. They sat and played and I sat and watched them. I still cried by myself, but since I had to spend all my days with them, I gradually became tamed. I was their pet bird. Memories of my childhood are but a heap of rubbish. However, I have gone and set them down.

Our merciful Father! You are always with us, you are inside the mind. Why, then, does the mind suffer so?

Since the father is merciful
What is there to fear?
Since you yourself are my father
Why do I have any fears at all?
When we depend on your name
No danger comes upon us.
Wherever your name sounds
No male or female ghosts may survive.
The sweet nectar of your name
Fills up the place with holiness.²²

That household had nine maidservants. Of them, one was to help out with the household work, the others worked outside.²³ I had nothing to do at first. My mother-in-law used to cook for us all, she would not let me do anything. I sat around all day, surrounded by the children of the village. They played with me, as did those maidservants. Since I spent so much time with them, we became really close. They were like the playmates from my father's home. I no longer cried that much, though I still did, a little. I was idle all day long for nobody would let me work, there were servants and my mother-in-law was also there. I wondered what I should do. Girls were not allowed to read or write those days, so there was nothing at all that I could do. People did not use coins then, they made their transactions with shells or cowries. I began to design a whole lot of things with those cowries: miniature chandeliers,

flowers, mirrors, umbrellas, hanging shelves, drawers. I would decorate the rooms with these.

I would also cut out moulds from stones for shaping milk sweets. I used ropes of jute to construct hanging shelves. And I made a whole lot of toy animals with clay—snakes, tigers, jackals, dogs, cows, birds—human figurines, figures of various deities. One day, I made a clay snake, painted it and put it under the bed. No one had seen me make it. Suddenly, someone saw a snake and ran out to call in people from the *cutchhery*.²⁴ They came in with all sorts of weapons, thinking they had to kill a real snake. Some climbed up on the roof, some ran around with cudgels or with spears. I did not know that it was my clay snake that had caused all this pandemonium. I could have prevented their exertions had I known about it. It really was something to look at. It was quite terrifying, as if a real snake had spread out its fierce hood and was poised to spring! No one dared to come close to it. Finally, someone took aim from a pole that was suspended from the ceiling, and brought down a blow with a cudgel. The clay snake shattered in a thousand fragments. There was a great deal of laughter about the whole episode and at last I got to hear of it. I knew what had really happened but I was too embarrassed to say anything. After that I gave up toymaking and went back to my idleness. But something in my mind kept telling me: "You are wasting your time, nothing worthwhile is happening to you. All this pleasure is mere foolishness."

Some time passed this way. Soon my mother-in-law lost her sight from enteric fever and she could do no work. She could not even look after herself, I had to nurse her. Moreover, all the household chores fell on my shoulders. I was worried out of my wits. I had never been allowed to work before. Also, this household was quite a large organism. There was the

household deity, and tending to him was a daily chore since his meals had to be ritually cooked.²⁵ There was a perpetual flow of guests and they had to be fed separately. Our own meals were on a large scale. Though I had no brothers-in-law, there was still a number of servants and maidservants. I had to cook for twenty-five to twenty-six people twice a day. On top of all this, my blind mother-in-law had to be cared for. I had only one maidservant to help me out, and she, too, was absent at that time. I was all by myself. Hurling into this ocean of responsibilities, I felt myself to be completely inadequate. I called out to the Great Lord helplessly: "Lord, I can't possibly cope with all this on my own. It can only be done if you mercifully see me through." With this prayer on my lips, I started on my life of labour. God helped me to do all that, I became such an expert worker that singlehandedly I managed all the cooking twice a day. Women were not educated in those days. They had to do all the work at home. If they had a single moment of leisure, they were expected to tend to the head of the household. That meant they had to stand at his side meekly and humbly. People used to insist that women were only meant for domestic chores. Newly-wedded girls had to be especially hard-working and quiet. They had to work from behind a long veil and then they would get to be known as good wives. Our clothes used to be so coarse, not like the fine cloth of today. I had to cover my face with that, my veil had to reach down to my chest, and, dressed in this way, I did all the work. I spoke to no one, I could hardly see anyone beyond my veil. My eyes were covered, like the eyes of the oil presser's bullock. I had to look down, all I could see were my own toes. This was how young married women were supposed to work. And I worked that way, too.



Fifth Composition

Lord of us all Great Lord of the world
The One without beginning or end
Let my heart Adore that treasure
He is the Original Cause behind all things.
My heart sinks In the ocean of worldly goods
It is immersed in bottomless greed
It cannot escape Ah, what folly is this.
He is cast out of the heart, forgotten.
Why have you forgotten him? Do you not know
That he is like the sun in the sky?
Do you not know yet That this world of wealth and kin
Is but mere illusion?
You think your family belongs to you And you care for them
You cherish them from the day they are born
But they all have to depart For the House of Death
And then you are all on your own.
In vain do you care And nourish your wealth
You will have to leave that behind
My heart, do ponder on this You came alone into this world
And so will you depart alone from here.
You have to go And meet that Being
Who brought you into this world
Why do you forget it When you are in the world
Why are you ensnared in illusion?
My own mind I plead ardently with you
Do not travel along this false road
Dwell on him alone He who is closer than all others
He who is the Great Lord.
He is the real treasure And you may attain that
Only if you are empowered by knowledge
Take shelter at his feet That will release you from fear

You will overcome the terror of death itself.

You want to cross over This sea of Life

Why, then, do you forget?

That Kind Friend of the poor He alone is your help on the way

Never forget this truth.

I would start working at dawn, and I would still be at it until well beyond midnight. I had no rest in between. The Great Lord, however, mercifully made me see it as my own responsibility, so I never resented it. Thus he willed, and thus I took over the entire housework upon myself. I was only fourteen years old at that time. I came to nurture a great longing: I would learn to read and I would read a religious manuscript. I was unlucky, in those days women were not educated. People would say: Ah, it seems the kali age²⁶ is, indeed, upon us! Now women will take over men's jobs. This had never happened all this while, but now it is going to come! In our days we were spared this; now the man is but a passive thing, the woman is the public figure. This is the age of a female monarch. What else do we have to put up with? The way things are going, soon gentfolk will lose their caste. Perhaps these wretched females will get together and start educating themselves!

Clusters of people would sit together and carry on in this vein. Such talk terrified me. Let alone express my wishes openly, I was so scared that someone may stumble upon them that even if I came across a piece of paper, I would not glance at it, in case people suspected that I was trying to read it. In my heart, however, I was forever praying: "My Lord! Teach me to read, I'll read religious manuscripts." God, who befriends the poor! I used to think of you at that time only because of this need. I used to pray: "Great Lord! You have brought me so far, from my birthplace Potajia to this Ramdia village. It takes three days to travel this distance. You have taken me away from

all my friends and relatives, now Ramdia is my own place. How strange is this! Once I knew nothing about working and my mother used to be so delighted whenever I made the slightest attempt at it. Now that I have been enslaved, I have learnt to do so much work. So all these people have come to like me." So would I speak to myself, and, behind my veil, I would cry and cry, but nobody would see my tears. Friend of the poor, you alone have been their witness. Ah, my Great Lord, my father! Ah, the heart of my heart, life of my life! Ah, you gem of mercy, ocean of compassion! I am afloat forever on your mercy. You have stayed with me in my days of trouble and in my days of success. You know my every feeling, nothing ever escapes you.

I left my father's village of Potajia when I was twelve. Since then I have been in Ramdia. The people of this household have been very kind to me, they are good people. Their affection made me forget all pain.

All the servants and maidservants of this household, all the neighbours in this village loved me so well that I was convinced that the Great Lord has spoken to them. I was also convinced that these people loved me more than they loved their own folk. Not once has anyone rebuked me. Truly, people of this land are good people. I have lived here so long, I still live here, they (not to speak of my own family) sincerely love me. Not even unwittingly have they been rude to me. This has been so until now, but who knows what is going to come later. Who knows how much longer I have to stay here. Who knows what I'll have to face in my last days, how they will look upon me then! Only the Great Lord can tell.

My Lord! Father of the world, who pervades this world! Infinite is your glory. You alone know your deeds, we'll be fools even to wonder about them. I was twelve when I came

to Ramdia. For the next six years I was like the young bride. Even my mind had remained immature. It was like this until I was eighteen. But it was rather a nice mind that I had.²⁷ I never thought of worldly affairs, my one thought was how to do all my work and how to please everyone. Nonetheless, it is deplorable that I was not allowed to educate myself because I was a woman. How very lucky are girls of this generation! These days many try to educate their daughters. Whatever others may say, I think this is a most positive development.

Let me give some details about my children. When I was eighteen, I had a son. He was called Bepinbehari. At twenty-one, I had a second son, he was Pulinbehari. At twenty-three, I had a daughter, she was Ramsundari. At twenty-five, another son was born, he was Pyarilal. I had a son again at twenty-eight, he was Radhanath. At thirty, another son was born, he was called Dwarakanath. At thirty-two, yet another son came, he was Chandranath. At thirty-four, I had another son, that was Kishorilal. After that, I miscarried a son in the sixth month of my pregnancy. At thirty-seven, I had another son, he was Pratapchandra. At thirty-nine, I had another daughter, she was Shyamsundari. When I was forty-one, I gave birth to my last son Mukundalal. I had my first child when I was eighteen and my last child was born at forty-one. The Great Lord alone knows how those twenty-three years went by. No one else knows anything about that. There were eight maidservants attached to the household at that time, but they all worked at outdoor jobs. I had no one to help me with the domestic chores. I did the entire work all by myself, as I had been doing it before, but now I had all these children to bring up as well. I never knew any rest, nor could I look after myself. Let alone other things, often I could not even manage to get two square meals a day. There were days when I missed having even a

single meal, such was the pressure of work. Anyway, let us not talk of all that. It's not worth mentioning, I am ashamed even to bring it up. Nevertheless, it is necessary to briefly describe a day or two. I would get up in the morning while the children still slept and I would start working. I had to cook the rice before they got up. After I had fed them, I would finish off other chores and then prepare for the ritual meal that was daily offered up to the domestic deity. Then I would prepare and cook lunch for the entire household. It was quite a lot of food! It would be about ten to twelve seers of rice for the evening meal alone. In the meantime, *karta*²⁸ must have his rice as soon as he had finished his bath. He did not relish anything else for breakfast. So, his rice had to be cooked early and separately. Then I cooked for everyone else. I would be cooking lunch until three or four in the afternoon.

One day, I had just finished off all this work and was about to sit down to my own lunch, when a guest arrived. He was a Namasudra by caste.²⁹ He would not cook for himself so late in the day even when he was given all the provisions, but he asked for some cooked rice. It was too late to cook anything, so I just had to give him my own food. I told myself that I would eat at night after I had cooked dinner. I did all the afternoon chores and after I had put the children to bed, I began to cook dinner. I was nearly dying of hunger by then. I was alone in the kitchen and it was full of various kinds of foodstuff. I could have eaten some of that, who would tell me not to? In fact, folks would have been glad if I had taken something. But I never used to serve myself any other kind of food except rice. That is why, I never got to eat a whole lot of things. I also thought that if I took something, people would get to know that I had no lunch that day and there would be a lot of fuss. Also, if they found that their mother was eating,

the children would come and create pandemonium in the kitchen and that would bother others. Let me not waste time with this. So I started cooking dinner. After it was over, I had to wait till late in the night. The *cutchhery* work went on and on, and *karta* had not yet come inside, so I sat and waited. I served the others and finished off all other chores and then I waited with his meal. I was worried that since he was coming so late, the children would start to wake up while he ate. And once that happened, I would have no time to eat. And that is exactly what happened. As soon as *karta* came inside, the baby woke up and started to cry. I served *karta*, and I took the baby into the kitchen. I told myself that he would drop off to sleep by the time his father had finished eating, and then I could eat while he slept on my lap. But before *karta* had finished his meal, another child got up and began to cry. I brought him in as well and thought that I would eat with both the sons on my lap. But before I could get started, a storm broke out and the lamp was blown out. The kids were frightened in the dark, so they began to howl. I was so very hungry that had I been alone, I would have eaten in the dark. But there were only two maids, and they were meant to do outdoor jobs. I could not leave my sons outside in the dark by themselves. Also, whenever they cried at night, *karta* used to wake up and shout: "Why are they crying?" For all these reasons it was better to go without food. So I left my plate of rice in the kitchen and went away. The boys went off to sleep once the storm had abated. By that time it was very late and I was too tired to get up and eat, so I went without any food that whole day. The next day, again, I did all the usual chores and went over early to cook. No one knew that I had gone without food. I had decided that I would eat as soon as all the others had eaten. But someone was looking after the baby, he

needed to be fed. After I gave him his share, I took the baby upon my lap and sat down to eat. But as soon as I sat down, the baby crapped on my lap. He also peed so profusely on the rice that it was practically washed away.

I began to laugh to see the Great Lord try me so. I told no one that I had gone without food for two days, I kept it to myself. It would have been most shameful to refer to my eating in public.³⁰ No one ever came to know of these things, but quite often I had to go without food for whole days. Thank the Lord that I was not a sickly creature. Had I been so, what would have happened to my children? Lord of the world! Who can measure your boundless compassion! What deep concern you have shown to this daughter who is in your bondage! The very thought makes me dizzy, it is overwhelming! I am your ignorant daughter, I know nothing of your glory. This slave of yours used to chant your name those days only because her mother had asked her to do so. But it has blessed my very birth, my whole life has been blessed, I feel gratified.

My compassionate Father! I am a miserable creature, I know you not. Had you not been with me at that time, if this body of mine had been invaded by sickness, what on earth would have I done? Who would have looked after my children, what would I have done with myself? I would have been cast out on a sea of sorrows. So I thank you a hundred times! Preserver of the poor! Out of your kindness, you have shown me how much a mother suffers to bring up even a single child. I had not known before how great is the burden of pain for the mother who raises a child. One can only know it through one's own difficulties and experiences, I got to understand it so thoroughly because I suffered so much myself. Every human being should know of this but

very few actually do. I had a very loving mother of my own, but I never got a chance to look after her—this will be a great sorrow forever. A mother is such a precious gift, but even when I came to realise it, my knowledge was useless to me. My mother had suffered so much for me, but I was of no use to her, I did nothing for her. She always missed me bitterly, she tried hard to get me to visit her. But I have been locked up in a prison ever since I came here. I could never be allowed to visit her because the household chores here would suffer. If ever I had to go to her on some ceremonial occasion, I was like a prisoner let out on parole, I had to be back within a couple of days. At least ten to fifteen people, two guards, two maidservants accompanied me on the boat ride. I had to come and go according to the letter of the contract.³¹ I could only visit her on ritual ceremonies. My mother longed so to see me when she was on her deathbed. I am such a miserable sinner that I made her suffer even in her last moments. I, too, tried desperately to pay her a last visit, but I had no luck, it was not to be. This is not an ordinary grief! Alas, my Lord! Why did you create me as a human being? It is a rare fortune to be born a human being among all the lower creatures of this world. I was born one, and yet I lived to be such a sinner! Why was I born a woman? Shame on my life! Who in all this world is as loving as the mother? It is hardly an exaggeration to call her the representative of the Great Lord. I did have this priceless treasure in my mother, but I could not look after her. Is there anything in the world to match this sorrow? Had I been her son, I would fly like a bird to reach her side when I got news of her end. What was I to do, I was behind bars, I was shut up in a cage.



Sixth Composition



Born in the land of Bharat Immersed in dreams of false desires
 I have wasted my time carelessly.
 How will I escape this Where are you, Lord, who sustains the world
 Have mercy upon me I am a wretched creature.
 Lord, You pervade the world You are the apocalyptic end
 Who can have perfect knowledge of you?
 How will I describe That Five faced God,³² had I even five mouths
 Even Infinity itself cannot reach the end of him.
 The Agams and the Nigams³³ The Vedas and the Koran³⁴
 Try to understand your truth
 How can they know you And comprehend your designs
 Who can have perfect knowledge of you?
 In all the three worlds Who is there to understand you
 Unless you choose to reveal yourself?
 What power do I have Which will lead me to you
 I am but a helpless woman.
 You inhabit everything As the essence of all things
 That alone is my hope
 I throw myself upon your feet Whether you take me across or
 you don't
 Is going to be the measure of your glory.

I was immersed in a life of labour, I hardly knew how time went by. Little by little, a desire took shape in my mind and I came to be possessed by a single wish: I will learn to read, and I will read a sacred text. I began to resent my own thoughts. What is wrong with me? Women do not read, how will I do it, and why does this bother me so! I didn't know what to do. It isn't as if all our ways were evil those days, but this certainly was. Everyone got together to deprive women of education. It must be said that women of those times were most unfortunate,

they were hardly any better than beasts of burden. However, it is useless to reproach others about this, that was what fate had decreed for me. Really, how cross those old housewives would be if they saw a woman with as much as a piece of paper in her hands. So, how was I to learn anything? But my heart would not accept this, it was forever yearning. I began to ponder: as a child I had learnt something at that school at home from the other students who used to recite the letters loudly. Would I remember any of that? Slowly, with great effort, I managed to recall the thirty-four letters, the vowels and the spellings. That, again, was something that I could recite but not write. What was I to do? Truly, if no one teaches you, you can't learn a thing. Moreover, I was a woman, and a married one at that. I'd die if someone was to rebuke me. Nor was I supposed to talk to others, so my fears kept me nearly mute. I prayed all the time: Lord of this world! If you teach me yourself, I shall certainly learn. Who else will teach me if you don't? These thoughts were always with me. Many days passed thus.

Then I had a dream: I was reading the manuscript of *Chaitanya Bhagabat*. When I woke up, an unearthly joy possessed my body and heart. I kept closing my eyes even when I was fully awake, I kept going back to the memory of the dream. It was as if I had been given a priceless jewel. As my body and mind filled with delight, I began to wonder: "Isn't it strange? I have never seen this book before, I wouldn't even recognise it. Yet I was reading it in my dreams. I can read nothing at all, let alone something like this, it is impossible. Even then, I am blessed that I was at least able to read it in my dream. Since I am always praying to God to teach me to read, he has allowed me to do so in my dream, for he never actually did teach me. This is, indeed, a great blessing, thank the Lord for blessing my birth, for fulfilling my deepest desire." I was so happy.

I began to think, "This house has many books, maybe *Chaitanya Bhagabat* is also there." But what difference could that make to me? I didn't know how to read, I couldn't even identify the book. So I resumed my prayers: "Lord of the poor! Lead me to the book that I saw in my dream. You have to do this, who else can bring *Chaitanya Bhagabat* to me?" Thus I spoke to the Great Lord.

What a miraculous proof I had of the wonderful mercy of the Compassionate One! As I was brooding, he heard my wish and he set about granting it immediately. My eldest son was eight years old at the time. As I sat cooking in the kitchen, I heard *karta* say to him: "Bepin, I have left my *CB* here. When I ask for it, bring it in." He left the book there and went away.

I heard all this from the kitchen with great delight. I rushed over to look at the book. Thanking the Lord for listening to my prayer, I opened it and felt it all over. Manuscripts were very different from the printed books of these days. They used to be pressed between wooden slats which were colourfully illuminated.³⁵ Since I didn't read at all, I memorised the illumination in order to identify the book.

When the book had been taken inside, I secretly took out a page and hid it carefully. It was a job hiding it, for nobody must find it in my hands. That would lead to severe rebukes and I would never be able to put up with that. It was not at all easy to do something that is forbidden and then to face the consequences. Times were very different then, and I was an exceptionally nervous person. Such days! One was entirely in bondage and my fears were great. That page was a headache. Where could I hide it that nobody would come across it? Eventually, I decided that it must be a place where I would always be present but which nobody else visited much. What else could it be but the kitchen? I hid it under the hearth.

But there was never any time to look at it. I finished cooking very late in the night. After that was over, the children started waking up, one after the other. And then it was pandemonium! One says, Ma, I need to pee, another says, Ma, I am hungry, and yet another says, Ma, take me on your lap, while someone else wakes up and starts bawling. I had to look after them all. After that it got even later, I couldn't fight off sleep any more, there was no time to study the page. I could see no way out of it. How can one learn without a teacher? I could silently say a few letters to myself, but I could not write them. It is impossible to master the word³⁶ without knowing how to write.³⁷ I saw no way of reading that page, however hard I thought about it. Moreover, the fear of exposure was always there.

Helplessly, I prayed to the Lord: "Great Lord, do help me to read this, who else is there to teach me?" Thus I prayed all the time but I would also despair at times. Even if someone did teach me the letters, where was the time to pursue that? Why cherish an impossible dream? At other times, I would hope again. Since the Great Lord himself has planted this hope in me, he will not thwart it. So I held on to the page. Even though I hardly had the time to glance at it, I would occasionally keep it in my left hand while I was cooking, and sometimes I would steal a look at it from under the veil. The letters, however, remained inscrutable.

My eldest son was practising his letters on palm leaves at that time. I hid one of them as well. At times, I went over that, trying to match letters from that page with the letters that I remembered. I also tried to match the words with those that I would hear in the course of my days. But after a quick look at them, I would hide them under the hearth once more. I spent quite a bit of time in this fashion.

Ah, what a sad thing it was! Such misery, only because one was a woman! We were in any case imprisoned like thieves, and on top of that, reading was yet another crime. It is good to see women having an easier time of it now. Even if someone has a daughter these days, he educates her carefully. We suffered so much just to learn to read. Whatever little I learnt was entirely because God was kind to me.

The man who was my master was a good person. But it is most difficult to abandon the custom of the land. That is why I suffered so. However, why dwell on past misfortunes! Those days, people were convinced that it is sinful to educate women. Why blame them alone, even now there are those who go up in smoke at the thought. It is useless to blame them either. Time is a priceless treasure. Those times and these are so different, if we compare them, we won't be able to count the changes that have happened. If people from those times were to see the ways of today, they would die of grief and horror. Actually, we happily accept whatever the Great Lord decrees at a particular time. Women would then wear coarse clothes, heavy ornaments, an armful of conchshell bangles, their foreheads would be smeared with vermilion paste. It didn't seem so bad then. We ourselves didn't dress quite like that, but even so, I shudder to think of what we had to wear then.

Anyway, the Great Lord had taken care of me all that while, I was happy and contented. I can only say that whatever he does is providential. As a child, I had been made to sit in that schoolroom, and that now helped me a lot. I could match the letters I remembered with those on the palm leaf and on the page. I read to myself, in silence.³⁸ All day, I would try to go through this in my mind. With tremendous care and effort and over a long stretch of time, I learnt somehow to limp and

stammer across *CB*. Those days, we did not see printed letters, the handwritten letters on the manuscripts were immensely difficult to read. My reading was so painfully acquired! Even after such effort, I didn't know how to write. It takes a lot to be able to write—paper, pen, ink, inkpot. I would need to spread them all around me and then sit down to write. I was a woman, and on top of that, a married one. They are not meant to read and write. The authorities have decreed that this is a cardinal sin for women. How could I have tried to write in that situation? I was so scared of rebukes. So I killed my desire for writing and I would only read, and that, too, in secret. Even that had so far been beyond my wildest dreams. It is almost an impossible achievement, it was possible in my case only because the Great Lord himself guided me with his own hands. The fact that I could read at last was enough for me, I didn't think of writing.



Seventh Composition



Where are you, compassionate friend of the poor?
Look upon the sorrows of this miserable woman, take pity on her.

Merciful father, whose kindness is bottomless like the ocean

Help me across this sea of sorrows.

My heart is poisoned with the greed for possessions

I have forgotten you, what is going to happen to me?

I am an orphan, who will comfort me?

Who else will know my pain but you?

My sins are countless

I know not how I shall go across this life.

I can see that your mercy is incomparable, endless

I hope, therefore, that I shall strike shore.

Alas, I then remember within me
I do not know how to call you with a sincere heart.

Anxieties sieze me

Lord, You overwhelm me utterly.

I watch this endless ocean with despair
Saviour, save me in this moment of danger.

Father, who else can I call out to?

Who else has the power to save me?

Merciful one, your very name bespeaks your compassion

Why, then, am I so desperate?

I am devoid of intelligence and strength, I can hardly speak
Come and show yourself to me, come as the raft on the waves.

Lord, I cannot, I cannot bear this delay

Look at Rashsundari's pain, reveal your compassion.

Father! King of kings, Emperor over all! How can I be sorrowful, being the daughter of a great king? Is it at all possible? But Father! Just as a child suffers when her parents are far away, so I, too, suffer constantly for I do not see you.

I learnt to read in this way when I was twenty-five. I had spent twenty-five years in this manner. In the meantime, my childhood was irretrievably gone. The body had abandoned the garb of the child and had decked itself out for youth. The mind, too, had changed and had entered the realm of wordly duties. Ah me! What a wonder! No traces of my childhood were left!

At this point, my mother-in-law passed away and the entire responsibility of the rudderless household fell on my shoulders. It was a time of great difficulties. I had four children by then, and now I was to direct the household. Past conditions changed entirely, even the appellation that had been given to me—the new bride—was transformed. Some would address me as Mother, some would call me Mother-Mistress, some said

Daughter-in-Law, some others would call me Sister-in-law, or Mistress of the Household or Mother of the Household.³⁹ Thus I acquired a lot of new names. I was made over into a new person, my childlike ways disappeared. My body and my mind also entered upon a new state. It was as if I had become someone else. My uncertainties began to disappear, I gained new strength and confidence. I acquired a lot of property as well—I had my children, my servants and maidservants, my tenants and retainers. I began to tell myself, I have become a full-fledged householder now, isn't it strange? To most people, I have become the Mistress of the Household. Let us see what follows now.

I had three sisters-in-law. As they were widowed, they came to me.⁴⁰ They were very fond of me, they cared for me deeply. I, too, adored them as if they were some sort of deities. Even though they were my husband's younger sisters, and, hence, junior to me in kinship status,⁴¹ I—always a nervous person—feared them and served them humbly. So they, too, showered their affections on me. It is rare, indeed, to be on such terms with sisters-in-laws. Even after I had four or five children, I wouldn't dare to meet their eyes when I spoke to them. Though I was responsible for the household, I sought their opinion at every step. They were nice people in every way.

I was twelve when I left my father's house to come to my in-laws. Even when I was twenty-five, and my mind had changed a lot, I remained a bit childish. But it rarely came out in the open. When I was eight or nine, people used to tease me: Your mother hasn't been married yet. And I would believe them! When I was twenty-five, my intelligence at last began to send down a few roots, but that, too, was kept a secret, nobody could sense it.

There was a horse in the house, it was called Jayahari. One

day, my eldest son was sat upon it and was brought inside so that I could see him. I could hear folks say that this horse belongs to *karta* and some of them called out to me: Come and see, your son is riding a horse. Since I had heard that this was *karta's* horse, I began to wonder: how can I go out and stand before it? It must be shameful if *karta's* horse gets to see me.⁴² So I hid myself inside. Even though people kept calling me outside, I simply peeped out once or twice.

Heaps of paddy used to be piled up on the inner courtyard of that house.⁴³ That horse used to come and nibble at them every day. Now I began to hide myself from his view.

Once, after I had served a meal to my children and had gone into another room, that horse came and started nibbling at the paddy. I was in a fix. The children had just started their meal, they were calling out to me, some had begun to cry. And that horse kept on nibbling, there was no sign of its departure. I didn't know what to do, I kept dithering. I couldn't let myself be seen by *karta's* horse! My eldest son came to look for me and he tried to reassure me: "Ma, there's nothing to fear, that's the horse Jayahari, it won't do anything to you." Then I began to laugh at myself: Shame on me, am I really a human being? It isn't as if I am afraid of the horse, I avoid it because I am shy. But this is just a horse, not a person, how does it matter if it sees me? If people come to know of this, they will think that I am mad, they'll laugh at me. Actually, no one knew that I was shy of the horse, they thought that I was scared of it. I was too ashamed of myself to explain the real reason to them. But I gave up running away from the horse. In fact, those days we feared everything while these days younger people don't fear anyone. On the contrary, it is the older people who are wary of them. Anyway, how very foolish I was! Other people may legitimately laugh at me, I do so myself when I now recall all that.

So far, I had always done all my work from behind the veil which reached down to my chest. But now I found that the ways of the new bride won't do any more, the work suffers. I now began to talk to the maidservants a little bit. And I spoke to my sisters-in-law in a clearer voice.⁴⁴ I did all the household work by myself, and at moments of leisure, I'd read the *CB* in secret. Only the maidservants got to know of this. Some of the village women used to be with me all day, they, too, came to know. Some time passed in this way.

As more and more children began to arrive in a row, my status as the mistress of the household was consolidated. We often find that people pray to the Great Lord for wealth but I swear that I never longed for that. The Lord of the world was nonetheless kind to me, he gave me a bit of all that wordly people need. There was no room for any regret. I had my share of all that brings pleasure to householders, thank the Lord—sons and daughters, servants and maids, loyal tenants, relatives and kinsmen, status and honour, pleasure and enjoyment.

Folks say that numerous children are a source of pain for the mother. It is true. Obviously, not all of them are the same. Some are ignorant, some are immoral, some turn out to be ugly or foolish and some ruin their patrimony and engage in undesirable pursuits. People criticise them and their parents suffer so much that they lose the will to live. Since people love their children with all their hearts, their evil ways or their bad reputation bring them such pain that they are beyond comfort. Truly, children can make their parents suffer as nothing else can. If they turn out bad, they make you suffer when they live as much as when they die. And the mother suffers more than the father. The Great Lord, however, was generous to me, never did I have to suffer from this. All my children were good-looking, morally pure, educated, generous, kind, pious

and righteous. Their nature was such that they never brought me any pain. But one mustn't boast, God destroys the boastful. No one knows what fate has decreed for one.

Lanka was destroyed for it was too arrogant.⁴⁵ The Kauravas were ruined for they were too proud.⁴⁶

Bali was captured for excessive charity.⁴⁷ Excess is always evil.



Eighth Composition



You are the Lord of this life You are the beginning and the end

You see into our innermost soul

If the heart is deceitful You punish it instantly

You alone are its judge.

There is none else Apart from you

Who knows our hidden pain

How much more can I say Lord, you know it all

Do not say otherwise.

Lord, the saviour of sinners! Merciful friend of the poor!
You dwell in my heart, you know my every emotion, nothing escapes you.

You are the life of the world, the essence of the world

Lord, blessed be thy name.

If I have concealed any wrong that I might have done, do expose me. Remind me of all that I have managed to forget. I have never tried to deceive anybody by word or by deed. Even if I had done so inadvertently, do reform me, let me not err against your rules. My Father, the Great Lord! You know every thought that appears in my mind, there is nothing left for me to reveal.

I am but an ass, I know not how to write
It is only your grace that helps me to compose a few things.
Whatever I utter, whatever I think
Lord, all of it is in the hope of reaching you.

I had ten or twelve children. Had they turned out bad, had people spoken ill of them, I would have suffered horribly. By God's grace, I never needed to face that. On the contrary, people praise them abundantly, to my delight. So do their ways reassure me. I will now disclose all that this body and this mind had to go through at that time. People talk of the ocean of life. It is an ocean, no doubt, but if we compare its waves to those of a real sea, perhaps the waves of the sea of life would appear just as formidable. Nonetheless, the Lord has preserved me in great tranquility in the midst of those mighty waves. Even at times of grave crisis, I retained that serenity. Adversity failed to destroy that.

It was no ordinary crisis that I faced, it was no less a calamity than losing some of my sons. When I had to face that, it seemed as if waves of pain were tossing me up and down. My mind has generally been full of cheer. For the last twenty-eight years, my physical and mental states did not vary much. When I was forty, my eldest son Bepin was married off, and a new bride entered my home. My joy knew no bounds, my whole body was filled with delight. I became a mother-in-law. Now I was a senior person.⁴⁸ Out of these forty years, I had spent twelve at my father's home. After that I was subjected and subordinated and I spent twenty-eight years as a young wife. Those years did not see much change in me. Now, gradually, I began to age. Everything about me was changing. I thought to myself: What wonders the Great Lord works! Even though I was not really old at that time, so much had changed. Reviewing them, I reached a solemn realisation. Earlier, I was forever fearful. Who

planted such fears in me and who helped me to overcome them? Earlier, I could never venture out of the rooms alone at night, I needed at least two people to be with me and even then I would be nervous. Nowadays, I am still the same person with the same mind. Where did I get access to courage and strength? I could not understand it at all. How amazing! Who has made me fearless? Now I fear nothing, but what is it that has made me so? I never confide my desires to any living soul, yet all that I wish for does happen—who makes it so? There is yet another wonder: where did I get all this from—this house, these children and servants, such wealth, so much property over which I preside as the Revered Mistress of the Household? Who has appointed me to look after all this? It is entirely wonderful! The mind is dazzled by all this! What can I say about the One who makes all this happen, I can only thank him over and over again. Merciful father! Where are you? Do reveal yourself to your miserable daughter, fulfil her longing, bless her existence!

Why am I chained to this world? Who has ensnared me in this web of illusion? My heart has abandoned itself to greed—to desires for wealth and property. Yet, that isn't fair, someone is making it so. It is that one who causes everything to happen—he is the one who binds us to this enchantment. My mind was filled with such arguments. It became distracted and restless.

I longed to listen to recitations of sacred texts, to sacred music. But times were strange! Those days, women were not at all free. They could take no initiative themselves, they lived in subjection, like caged birds. What were my feelings at that time?

I had such strange feelings

As if a midget longed to reach out to the moon.

It was as if my mind had sprouted six arms. Two of them served the whole household, so that none should be unhappy. Two others were clutching my sons close to my heart. But the other two thrust themselves up to reach out to the moon. Really, my own mind amazes me! Look, the moon is millions of miles away from us. Can one ever hold it in one's hands? The very desire is absurd. Just as when babies cry for the moon and the mother distracts them by singing songs, asking the moon to come down to the child, so I, too, tried to distract myself like a child. I longed to listen to sacred texts and songs. But how to do it? All these things took place at the outer quarters of the house, they couldn't be heard from the inner quarters.⁴⁹ The outer courtyard was quite far off from the inner parts and I could never go there. What was to be done? My heart would not be calmed, it yearned to hear the sacred texts.

I did read a little, but where was the time for it? Moreover, I was so scared of rebukes and criticism! My mind would not accept this, and yet there was no way out. After much thought I decided that I would read out from the manuscript when my three sisters-in-law would be busy with their daily ritual worship in the morning. If they were to catch me at it, I'd have had it. I chose a deserted spot, sat down with the village women who were always with me, and began the reading.⁵⁰ One of them was detailed to keep a watch and to warn us if someone came that way. I would read out only in small bits, and even then I would be seized with terror so very often. Truly, my fears were my worst enemy. I was always afraid, I feared everything. My companions, however, were good people. Sometimes, when they asked me to sing, I would even do so just for them.⁵¹ Many years have passed since then. There are still some people from those times who say that it

is evil to teach women to read. They say: "Do women need to earn money? These days women are crazy about education. We used to think that women need to observe the proprieties, do their work at home, cook and serve the food. We had lived in saner times. These days there is a craze for education. We are not educated, aren't we human beings, then? Did we not live full lives?" Thus they grumble among themselves. Clearly, the only use that they can see for education is that of earning money. Such talk frightened me enormously, but I didn't stop my secret reading.

After some time, I began to talk more frankly with my sisters-in-law. It made them happy and it brought us much closer. Soon they came to know that I could read books. They were delighted and began to say: "How marvellous that you can read! We didn't know that all this while!" I began to teach two of them but they soon had to stop, they could not pick up much. I was much adored because I could read. I needed to read in secret no longer, I obliged my sisters-in-law by reading out to them. How wonderful it was that the Great Lord at last granted me my deep desires! My joy knew no bounds, the work at home felt light as feather. The Great Lord had granted me an old wish. Sometime I would sing together with my women neighbours. So the days passed happily. I cared very little about wordly concerns, my heart was filled with a sacred love.

Evidently, people have to put up with much anguish in this life. Even though no one had deliberately hurt me, yet bitter suffering came my way. Ah, my Lord! Nothing can be worse than the death of sons. I had borne twelve children. Ten of them were sons, and two were daughters. Let me talk about those who died. The second son Beharilal died at the time of his Rice Eating ceremony.⁵² Pyarelal died when he

was twenty-one. He was studying at Behrampur College and he died over there. Radhanath died when he was thirteen. Chandranath died when he was only three. Mukundalal, the youngest one, died when he was four. My eldest daughter gave birth to a son when she was seventeen, and she died thirteen days later, while she was still at the lying-in-room. The son also died there. I miscarried a son in the sixth month of pregnancy. My eldest son Bepinbehari had two sons. Both have died, at the ages of three and four.

Sorrow overwhelms me when I think of these deaths. So many have died—two sons of my son, one son of my daughter, six sons of mine and one daughter. Now I have four sons and one daughter left. The Lord alone knows what awaits me. He measures out possessions and dangers equally for the householder. Some may think only of the inevitable pain and dwell obsessively on that. On the other hand, there are those who go through terrible misfortunes, but who make little of that.

Folks say that losing a son is like being struck by a weapon.⁵³ But when we think about it, we find that the comparison does not hold. A man may even die of a bad physical injury. If it is a light one, then the wound may hurt for some time. But the pain goes away once the wound dries up. The pain of bereavement, however, lives as long as we live. Even if with great effort, we manage to conceal it and attain some semblance of outward normalcy, the pain simply digs itself in and burns up the heart. Bereavement is the worst pain of all. It can drive one mad. One is hardly human, one longs for death. Death escapes us, however, and that pain is worse than death.



Ninth Composition



My Lord, the ocean of mercy Friend of the destitute
 Saviour, who saves us all from danger
 I call out to you from the bottom of my heart Do you not hear me?
 Why are you deaf to my pleas?
 I am your creature Do look towards me once
 Lord, I am dying!
 You know my heart Why are you false to me?
 How much more should I plead?
 Even a cruel and evil person Will respond to such appeals
 While your mercy is as bottomless as the sea
 I am a woman, I am subjected I am also so very weak
 Do not be uncharitable to me.
 There are innumerable sinners All over this world
 All will be saved at your feet
 Will you abandon this helpless woman And save the rest of the world
 Goddess, let me see how you can do it!
 You are the Lord of the universe The shelter of wrongdoers
 You are called the saviour of sinners
 You will not avoid Rashsundari It is beyond you
 You are bound to take her into your safe custody.

It is impossible to make sense of what the Great Lord does! He alone knows what he will do! I remember perfectly well that after I had learnt to feed myself, no one ever had to feed me. However, on 27 Bhadra, in 1280,⁵⁴ I was reduced to that infantile state. My food was ready, I was about to start on it, when suddenly I cut open the index finger on my right hand. Blood spurted out, so I couldn't eat by myself, someone else had to feed me. Since we can't even be sure of the fact that we will eat by ourselves if we wish it so, it is certain that we can't take a step without God's help. What do we boast of, then?

Clearly, everything else is false, he alone is real. Why, then, do people say, my body, my house, my home! It is all false. Human beings don't ever stop erring.

Enough of that, let me get on with my story. Even though the loss of my sons continued to haunt me, I was not completely crushed. Even before I had learnt to use my intelligence, my mother had imparted to me the sacred name of the Merciful One. That was the great panacea, it has seeped into my bones. Whenever my body and mind succumb to the deadening poison of worldly greed, that marvellous medicine in my bones grows like the sacred Vishalyakarani tree⁵⁵ and cures my malaise, and fills me with joy. The poison is drained out and all the inner evil is routed. The Vishalyakarani is invincible. A whiff of that marvel is enough to destroy all our evil inclinations, to relieve us of all poisonous maladies, to bathe us in nectar. Alas! People suffer so much because they know it not. This is so very sad! We are born with eyes, yet we are blind! People think that the Vishalyakarani is situated on the top of the Gandhamadan Hill, it is impossible to procure it. How wrong we are! The seeds of that medicinal plant have already been sown in our heart, yet we know nothing about it. That is why we wallow in sorrows. It is our evil fate that even though our hearts are full of such priceless gems, yet we, wretched beings that we are, fail to discover that and therefore live in poverty. The very thought pierces the heart. If I did not possess this great inheritance from my mother, I do not know how I would have come through. Anyway, thanks to the mercy of the Merciful One, I am always filled with the joy of divine love. I am blessed! Our great Father! Preserver of the wretched, Merciful One! We see but we do not realise that you shower your mercy upon us all the time. You work such wonders with our bodies! We inhabit these bodies, we

look upon them constantly. But we never fully know what is going on within. Lord! We cannot even know a fragment of your wonders, and we desire to know you! There is none so ignorant as he who wants to grasp your essence! But we are convinced that you love your devotees. You have said so yourself: "My devotees are my parents, they are my prayers, their hearts are my place of rest." Whoever calls out to you sincerely, you go to him, you become his unchained captive. You are the original cause of all my action. You know all my feelings, nothing escapes you. I was yearning to read books, and you worked your wonders so that I got to read all the books in that house.

I am amazed when I think of this. I knew nothing, it is a marvel that I learnt to read at all. It is only his glory that worked this miracle, that fulfils all desires. For better or for worse, the Great Lord did grant me my wish. I was dying to read, and I read enough to satisfy myself. I gradually finished all the books that the house possessed—*Chaitanya Bhagabat*, *Chaitanya Charitamrita*, eighteen chapters of Jaimini's *Bharat*, *Gobinda Lilamrita*, *Bidagdha Madhab*, *Premabhakti Chandrika*, *Balmiki Puran*.⁵⁶ However, we had only the introductory chapter (Adi parva) of *Balmiki Puran*, not all the seven chapters.

God has made us so that if we get even a fraction of anything, we immediately hunger for all of it. Our minds have this innate tendency. I was eager to read the seven chapters, once I had finished with the Introduction. Ours is a mere village, however, and I could not acquire it despite a lot of effort. My mind gave me no rest. My fifth son Dwarikanath was then a college student in Calcutta. If I could write him a letter, my troubles would be over. But I did not know how to write. Almost everyone knew now that I could read even though they did not know what it had cost me to learn. When

they heard that I could read, they were pleased. I was very lucky. I used to be so scared, but then I realised that no one minded at all, they were happy about it. Had I just asked for the book, they would surely have got it for me. But I always found it difficult to ask anyone for anything. It is only now that I can occasionally ask my children for a few things.

Anyway, I was longing to read the book. In the meantime, that son came home from Calcutta in the holidays. I said to him: "Dwari! There are so many books in your home, but there isn't a complete set with seven chapters. I would love to have a copy." Dwari said: "Ma! I'll send you one as soon as I get back to Calcutta." I was so keen on the book that I felt quite ill with longing. The mind, too, suffered a lot.

After a few days, that book reached us. I was very excited as I opened it. It was a book in very small print. I couldn't read it at all.⁵⁷ I was incredibly sad. Tearfully, I reproached the Lord. I said to him: "Lord of the poor! You have brought this book to me at last, but it is useless to me. I can't read it even though I got it after such effort." My tears soaked my breast.

I felt ashamed of myself after a while. If someone were to ask me the reason for my tears, what would I say? I did not know how to read at all, who taught me? He gave me so much when he taught me to read. If he wills it so, I'll surely read this book as well.

I checked my tears and concentrated on the book. With God's help, I could soon read the print well enough. I had thought that it would be impossible to read a printed book. Then I found out that print is better than the handwritten manuscripts of old times. Since I had very little education, it was easier for me to read print. I learnt to read a bit of everything. But I still could not write and this caused me much pain. I used to cry before the Great Lord: "Lord! In a way you

have kept me in reasonable comfort, I have a little of all that wordly people desire. But I suffer so because I cannot write. Teach me to write." I spent many days crying and praying over it, but I never did hope that I would be able to write. God willed it and out of the blue, my seventh son Kishorilal asked me: "Ma! Why do you never reply to our letters?" I said: "I can read, so I read your letters. But I can't write, so I do not reply to them." He said: "I can't have that. How do I stay away from home unless my mother writes to me? You have to write to me." He left ink, inkstand, paper and pen with me before he left for Calcutta. I was in a quandary. I could read a bit but I didn't know how to write at all. Even if I were to scribble a few letters with great effort, the household chores kept me too busy to have the time for it. But my son had sworn me to it. I did not know what to do.

While I worried about it, *Karta* suddenly contracted enteric fever. It affected his eyes. He went to Krishnanagar—Goari for treatment. I had to go with him. My fifth son Dwarakanath was working at Kanthalpota and we stayed with him. I had much less to do here. I learnt to write a little during that bit of leisure.

My learning didn't come easily, it cost me a great deal. I still marvel about it. It was as if the Great Lord guided me with his own hands. Otherwise it would have been impossible. I am fortunate indeed that I did learn a few letters. Perhaps, had I not known even this much, I would have been dependent on others. I am satisfied with what the Lord has given me. And that is not all. Even after he has given me so much, he stays with me and protects me in good fortune and in adversity. Alas! He is such a dear friend, a true companion of the heart, yet I hardly think of him, I am such a sinner! Shame on my greed, shame on my human existence, shame on my wretched

life! Why do I carry this sinful body any longer? My life is meaningless.



Tenth Composition



My careless mind You forget yourself
 What made you forget?
 Immersed in wordly goods That sweet Kashr⁵⁸
 Is burning in its own sins.
 If it falls down What is going to happen
 Can you tell me that?
 The play is over Time is over, too
 Pick up your merchandise, let's go.
 Into this market-place of the world You came to trade
 You came here for that
 But hordes of bandits Surround you on all sides
 Who knows what is going to happen!
 Your debt needs to be honoured After all this while
 You need to settle your accounts.
 Beware, beware Be alert all the while
 So that you are not cheated.
 The day is done While you haggled over prices
 And while you pored over the purchases
 Rashsundari thinks Whatever little you have left
 Take it back to your own home.

Ah me! What miracles the Lord of the universe works!
 When I reflect upon my own body and mind, I am
 overwhelmed and bewildered. In this one life of mine, my
 body and mind have gone through several phases. It is not
 easy to spell out how they were before, what they are like
 now, and what they are moving towards at this moment. It is

all the more difficult because I cannot regulate these changes. But let me try and say a few things.

I have no memories at all about these things upto the time when I was five or six. Perhaps, I was still not self-conscious or sensible.

When I was seven or eight, I was a little more intelligent. That, however, had little effect. My mind was still passive and the body was extremely delicate and weak. Others looked after my needs, I could take no initiative on my own. Some time passed in this way.

I was married off when I was twelve. After that I lost the unbounded love that I had enjoyed at my father's house. I have become completely subordinated. My childishness was totally stripped away, I became the new bride. All my ornaments were new, I was dressed differently and I learnt the ways of the new bride.⁵⁹ For six more years I was the new bride.

In the meantime, the Great Lord had decked out my body as one fits out a boat, with every necessary article. What a wonder that is! It is nothing short of a miracle. So many things happen to my body, and I know nothing of their causes.⁶⁰ Ah! Is this some sort of magic, or do I dream? Truly, if only we think of our own bodies, we come to believe in the Great Lord, we do not have to go any further. He is visible easily and vividly to our eyes. Our great father, that merciful ocean of compassion, is not far away from us, he is very close to us.

When the waves of this wordly existence were rough on the boat journey of my body, he, who saves us from all danger, was there to reassure me. Whatever I did, I knew that he was with me. I had my first child when I was eighteen. I bore twelve children.

Gradually, I joined the ranks of old women, but I remained attached to my household. For the next few years I was a keen

householder. Slowly, detachment began to set in. My body began to sag. I was in my late fifties now. I had three daughters-in-law and my youngest daughter had also become a mother. I was so happy with a full life, with such a large contingent of children, daughters-in-law, relatives and neighbours. Great Lord! Who can fathom your designs! You will do whatever you want to do.

You bite as the snake, you cure like the snake doctor
You give your verdict like the judge, you punish like the policeman.

I was born in 1216 and when this book was published in 1275, I was fifty-nine years old. Now, I am eighty-eight years old. Suddenly, everything has been transformed—my body, my mind, my dress and habits. Everything has become the opposite of its old state. People say that there are changes in each life. I found out that this was, indeed, true.

No one can change the decree of Fate
Be it Brahma, Vishnu or Maheswhar.⁶¹

Whatever the Great Lord wills, must be done. My long boat journey was in vain, the boat sank in sight of the coast.

Having your head tonsured is worse than death.⁶²

The Great Lord had done that to me. On the 21st of Magh, on the day of Shiva Chaturdashi, in 1275, my *Karta* passed away at two thirty in the afternoon.⁶³ I had a golden crown on my head, and now the crown has fallen off. Anyway, I do not regret it. Let the Great Lord keep me in any state that he wants to. In the same year, on the first day of Aग्रहयान, our family priest, Gunanidhi Chakrabarty also passed away.

So long my time had passed in a rather changeless fashion.⁶⁴

Now, at the end of my life, I am a widow. There is something that I want to say which is both shameful and sad.

Even if a woman with a hundred sons is widowed
She is regarded as most unfortunate by the people.

They always want to tell you that you have been widowed. Anyway, this body and mind, this life of mine have gone through such changes. Magic is wrought upon my body ceaselessly. I get to understand nothing of this. Let me praise that craftsman.



Eleventh Composition



Praise be to you, the eternal Brahman⁶⁵

Your slave submits this to you.

I came happily into the land of Bharatbarsha

Lord, why then, do I suffer from pangs of sorrow?

My heart suffers like the snake which has lost its jewel

So often it is startled and restless.

Lord, you see into our thoughts, you love your devotees

I know that truly you are a friend of the poor.

I have sinned a thousand times

Ocean of mercy, forgive me out of your own goodness.

What can I tell you, Lord, you know it all

I never desired wordly goods.

I do not hanker after sons, friends or wealth

My only desire is to attain your feet.

The world is false, only the path of right action is real

Let Rash be successful there.

My merciful father! Protector of the world who is
immanent in the world! Great Lord! Lord of the poor, the sea

of mercy, do save your poor daughter from her sins. Friend of the wretched, saviour of sinners, show some charity towards your daughter, your slave. Strength of the weak, wealth of the poor, Mother who saves us from danger! Take your weak child across the sea of life. I cannot live without you. Oh, eye of my eye, you who ravish my eyes! Do not go beyond my eyes, let my eyes be forever immersed in your great beauty. Lord of my heart and mind! Come, be at one with my heart. Let my heart not be absent from you for even a moment. Life of my life! My life's delight! Come, be enthroned in my heart, let my heart be afloat on a sea of love, let it be enfolded in your sweetness. My body still belongs to its frame, but it no longer is as it used to be. I could use it then for anything I wished to do. Now the boat no longer sets sail. Let me describe its present state briefly.

The frail body can hardly move
Straight lips are getting twisted at places.
The skin sags, the hair is greying
The teeth have melted away from the mouth.
How can I describe my movements?
I assume a more hideous shape by the day.

Anyway, it is difficult now to support this body of mine. It is decaying fast. The Great Lord had decked out my body once with a lot of decorations. Now he is taking them off one by one. Now I can see him, the life of my life. He sits at ease in my heart. Maybe, he is going to depart, once he has collected all his dues. However, I now think of something else, something that is strange. I came into Bharatbarsha such a long time back, and I am still here. When I look back on everything, I find that no one has ever said anything unpleasant to me. I have always had nice things said to me. No acquaintance or friend, no

neighbour or villager that I can think of, has ever said a word in rebuke that I can recall. I thank the Great Lord for this. He has always been entirely merciful in everything towards me. It is as if he told all these people to be kind to me. This has made me very happy all these years. Now, however, I am a widow. Now I have altered my old ways, I have almost renounced the household. But the Lord works such wonders! What amazing things have happened through this body of mine. He alone knows what is going to come next.

Now I am the only senior member of this household. All the rest are in the next world. My time is up, but no one knows when one has to leave for the next world. That is a problem. Had we known the date of our death beforehand, we would have escaped many misfortunes. But the Great Lord has planted the tree of hope in the human heart, it is most tenacious. That hope drives us through life. I live my life in the hope of the eternal fruit.⁶⁷ But, you who owns the fruit, who can tell what kind of fruit you will award to me at the end! Maybe, my last days will be full of bitter words. The very thought numbs me. Lord, the saviour of sinners! Let not that name of yours be in vain. You will never quench my hopes since you raised them yourself. You will have to fulfil them. I am firmly convinced that you decide our fate even before you create us. I think this is fairly evident. You do not rest even after you have sent us fully prepared into the world. You are with us in life and in death. At every instant you protect us. Why should we worry when we have such proof of your compassion? You will never go back on your promise. Moreover, you are the Lord of the wretched, the wealth of the poor, the boat in times of need and the strength of the weak. Your many names express your qualities. You will not go against your name in my case, a low creature even though I

am. Lord, who pervades the world, who is all powerful! There is nothing beyond you. You have created everything in all the worlds. Your wishes regulate the world. If you so wish, one glance from you can destroy Creation. But, that is impossible, you will never do that. Even if we sin a thousand times, even if we commit despicable deeds, you will never cast us away from your arms. You will be wherever we are.



Thirteenth Composition⁶⁸



Account of a Dream

Whenever we look closely into all that the Great Lord has created, we get a feeling that it is but a dream. Truly, people dream of the strangest things. When they wake up, however, all is gone. Likewise, all that you had in this world vanishes before your very eyes, so that, later, it feels as if it all had been a dream. There are two kinds of dreams: one that you see when you are awake, and one that you see in your sleep. Jagannath Mishra dreamt one night that his son Nemaichand had shaved off his head and had left Nabadwip. He broke into loud lamentations, calling out, Nemai, Namai. Whatever he had dreamt of came true.⁶⁹

Dasarath, the king of the Surya dynasty, passed away when his son Bharat was visiting his uncle. He died because Ramchandra, along with Lakshman and Sita, had been exiled to the forests. All this had actually happened, Dasarath was, indeed, dead, and the people of Ayodhya were mourning him. Bharat, at his uncle's place, dreamt of this very thing, and woke up, crying. How strange! Whatever had happened in his dream at night was confirmed in the morning.

Once I, too, had an equally strange dream which I'll set down carefully. My son Pyarilal was twenty-one, and he was studying in a college in Behrampore. I dreamt one night that my Pyarilal was very weak and ill. He was, in fact, at death's door. I dreamt that I was standing at his side. After a while he died before my eyes. He was set down on the ground and his body was covered with a cloth. I was standing there, watching all this. In the dream, I lost all control over myself, I started shaking convulsively. I flung myself down upon the ground and burst into sobs. Then, again, I saw that Pyarilal was being taken away for cremation. I was with him, I was going round the cremation fire, crying. My heart was bursting, I wanted to throw myself into the flames, but I couldn't quite bring myself to do that. After the funeral, when the last rites had been performed, everyone went home. I saw myself on the banks of the river Ganga, crying out and sobbing loudly: "Pyarilal, Pyarilal."

After a while, I saw a little boat coming towards me along the Ganga. It had no cover at all, there was nothing on it. There was only a man who was rowing the boat, and another who was travelling in it. I looked up, sobbing, and it seemed to me the other man was my son Pyarilal. I had been crying so hard and so long that my whole body was streaked with mud. I got up hastily and gazed at the boat. It seemed that I was no longer on the bank where I had been earlier, but had gone over to the other side. The boat was coming towards me. My joy knew no bounds. My whole body was filled with strength. I stood up, crying out to him like a madwoman. When at last the boat reached the shore, I remembered the earlier scene and moaned in pain. My Pyarilal stood before me with a melancholy, downcast face, as if he was sorry to see me in such a state. I cried out, "Pyari, come to me," but he did

not respond. After a long while, he spoke to me from the river in a very low and sad voice: "Ma, do you want to listen to the recitation of a religious text?" I was overjoyed to hear those words, to see that he was alive. In my dream I embraced him and said: "Yes, I do. Where is it?" He said, "Come with me," and he led the way. By and by, we approached a royal palace. There were many grand buildings, imposing courtyards, all manner of bright and beautiful things. There was also a most impressive building with a magnificent throne in the middle of it. Countless people surrounded the throne. I assumed that it was a courtroom. So far, Pyarilal had said not a word to me except that one sentence: "Ma, if you want to listen to the recitation, then come with me." Nonetheless, I was heartened to have him back with me, I followed him into the room contentedly. He left me behind at the courtyard and went up to ascend the throne. Never did he once glance back at me. It seemed to me that I stood there crying, calling out to him to come back to me.

I could see him quite well from where I stood. But Pyarilal responded neither to my calls nor to my tears.

I woke up from the dream, crying so hard that my clothes and the bedsheets were soaking wet. Even after I woke up, I felt as if I was still dreaming, I kept crying in my sleep. I could hardly speak, my heart was beating hard with dreadful anxiety. However much I tried to comfort myself, I would not be calm. I wrote down the date.

I was so upset that people sent for news from Behrampore. All that I had seen in my dream had actually happened. Pyarilal had passed away on that day, at that time and in that manner. The strangeness of it! What I had dreamt of in my sleep, what I could not make myself speak about once I woke up—so horrible had the dream been—had all come to pass.

[I have omitted some passages on similar experiences, including a second sight that enabled her to follow the accident that happened to another son who, however, survived.]

Anticipating Death

Most people in this world are terrified of death. If we carefully consider the matter, however, there is nothing so fearful about it. It is out of ignorance that people fear it so. I have seen for myself that dying is not really terrible. I will never forget about that.

Once I was very ill and weak with high fever. I was, in fact, close to death. I was lying on a bed. Suddenly, my body and mind went numb, I could neither move nor speak. I tried to get down but, however hard I tried, I couldn't move at all. I was not unconscious, my mind was fully alert, but my tongue was unable to utter my thoughts. All my children were quite small at that time, only the elder two were somewhat grown-up. They were sitting beside me and were sobbing wildly. I wondered, why can't I respond to them, I can hear them! But my tongue would not move. I was in a room that faced south. All of a sudden, everything seemed to turn red, and a little later, I could see nothing at all, everything went dark. As I tried to open my eyes fully, everyone cried out, she is going. They carried me outside.⁷⁰ I could not understand what was going on. I could see them all. I could even see that I had been brought outside. As I was being taken out, my head rolled out of their clasp and a man rushed over to hold it up. I was perfectly aware of all this. I was put down on the courtyard. It was amazing! Here I was, a corpse, but I could see it all. Loud lamentations broke out all around me. My eldest son sat beside me, his head thrust into his knees, crying and hitting himself on the head. His aunt clung to him and wept. The second son

threw himself down on the ground and sobbed. The other children were also crying, but they were small, other people had taken them in their arms. *Karta* of the household sat at the door and asked: "Is she gone? So be it then." A whole crowd had collected at the courtyard, everyone was crying. We had a *gomosta*⁷¹ called Thakur Harimohan Sikdar. He had never been inside the house, I had never seen him before. He sat next to me now, checking to see if I was still breathing, feeling my hand, my chest, and crying: "Alas! Our mother has left us." *Karta* was calling out his name. I could see that he was weeping profusely.

It was so strange! I could see everything, I could even see my own corpse. My eyes were closed, but I saw it all so clearly. I felt sorry for them, I wanted to comfort them, but I could do nothing. I could not understand how this was so. Some time passed in this way. I had no idea about what was going on.

At last my consciousness returned. It was as if I woke up from sleep. Strength returned to my body, I could move my limbs, I could speak again. I found that I was lying on the ground. Then I said: "Why have you brought me here?" People were thrilled at this. They lied to comfort me: "It was so hot inside, so we brought you out in the fresh air." They took me inside. How could I see all of this after I was dead? I have always found this astonishing, but I feel embarrassed about discussing it with other people. They might think that all of this has been made up. But I am telling you the truth, I am only saying what actually had happened to me.



Fourteenth Composition



[The verses at the beginning are omitted.]

Seeing A Ghost With My Own Eyes

People say that there are no ghosts, there can be no such things! I used to agree with them. However, ghosts do, indeed, exist. Once I saw something that might well have been a ghost.

I was about to set off for a bath one afternoon. There is a garden at the southern corner of our house. A very old tamarind tree stands there. I had just reached it on my way to the bath. There is a thorn tree (Babla) in front, and one of its branches was leaning on one side. That entire place is rather bare, there is only a little shrubbery. It was broad daylight. As I looked at the thorn tree, I saw that a dog was lying on top of the leaning branch. Its tummy was resting on the branch. It looked exactly like a human figure. Its limbs were hanging down from both sides of the tree. It seemed as if some bright conch-shell bangles were shining on them. I was amazed at the sight. I gazed at it and wondered: "It is incredible. Why should a dog lie on a tree in the first place, and, on top of that, why should it wear bangles? Has anyone seen or heard of such a thing before?" I stared at it for over an hour, I saw the whole thing perfectly clearly. I thought: "If only the others had seen this as well!" I looked behind just once to see if there was anyone else there, and, as soon as I turned back towards the dog, I saw that it had vanished. I looked for it all around the tree, but I couldn't find it again. There was, indeed, no other bird or beast in sight. It was broad daylight, I could see everything so clearly. Such a large dog just disappeared, and not a leaf had stirred! When I couldn't find it at all, I went

back into the house and told everybody about this. Some said it was a ghost, some said it was nothing, it was some sort of an optical illusion. Some others said, it couldn't be anything but a ghost. I know that I had seen a ghost. But people find it hard to believe since it was in the middle of the day.⁷²

Anyway, I have written about what I have seen. This is a partial account of the sixty years of my life.

My name is Mother. I had a name when I was in my father's house. That name has disappeared long back. Now I am the mother of Bepin Behari Sarkar, Dwarka Nath Sarkar, Kishori Lal Sarkar, Pratap Chandra Sarkar and Shyamasundari. Now I am everybody's mother.⁷³

This is the account of my life upto this point. Another account will be written at the time of my death.⁷⁴

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Fifteenth Composition

✱

I do not so much long to see Shantipur, Nabadwip or Ganga
But it is for Vrindaban that I yearn.⁷⁵

My mind had long desired

To travel around in the name of pilgrimage journeys.

What are Gaya and Kashi⁷⁶ like, what is Vrindaban like

Why do people settle down in these holy places for the rest
of their lives.

The Vedas say that Vrindaban is as sacred as Golak⁷⁷

Why, then, do people stay anywhere else at all?

The city of Baranas is, indeed, a second Kailash⁷⁸

The ascetic Ramat Dandi lives there.

I have always longed to see Annapurna⁷⁹

I wanted to gaze at Lord Digambar.⁸⁰

At Gaya one can see the holy footprints of the Lord clearly

The sight would bless my body.

My heart cries out for Vrindaban
How and when shall I reach it?
When will I be so very fortunate
That my sinful body will go to the land of Vraj.⁸¹
That I will actually set my eyes on the face of the merciful
Lord
When great ascetics do not even reach his feet through their
meditations.
Place your hands on my head, bless me
So that Rashsundari attains the Lord of Vraj in the land of
Braja.

I have set down a few facts about my life but the account has not a single word about *Karta*! I suppose that this leaves the book quite incomplete. However, a catalogue of all his virtues would be quite beyond me. It would be too large an account, if it were to be told properly. All that I can say is that he was a good man, the like of whom is rare in this world. He was big and heavily built, his very appearance proclaimed him as the head of the household. This was clear even to a stranger. He was a very kind man. He was immensely kind to his tenants as well as to others. He was also most generous. If a person interrupted his meal, asking for food, he would wait until that person had been served, and only then would he resume his own meal. He was very adept at official business. He loved litigation. He was a very powerful man, at any point of time he had twenty to twenty-five court cases going. He was never without them, he even lodged cases against important people. He would never lose a single one, but would always return victorious. Such was his power and his awesome voice that whenever he chastised someone, the whole village would tremble. He would be fighting cases with all the big zamindars. Once or twice he even brought *fauzdari* (criminal) cases

against planter Sahibs⁸² but thanks to the mercy of the Great Lord he never lost the suits. Mir Ali Mahmud was a very big landlord of Dakshin Bari. There were a lot of civil suits over land and estates that the two of them were fighting between them. In the village of Tentulia, Mir Ali owned twelve annas of the estates [75 per cent] while they (*Karta*) owned about four annas [25 per cent]. Apart from that, there were other lands and properties under dispute. Cases had been going on for over three generations. *Karta* had some land in the North. Once he had gone there on a visit. My eldest son Bepin Behari was only six at that time, many others were not yet born. All of a sudden, Mir Ali ordered that *Karta's* tenants should be harassed and thrashed and should be forced to pay him rent. The *gomosta* who looked after such affairs was extremely ill at that time. The folks at home said, what can we do, there is nothing that we can do now. I was the person in charge at home, but what do I understand of such matters? I was not supposed to look after these things. But the women of those tenant families came to me and began to lament about the oppression that they had to face. I found it impossible to ignore their suffering. My son was not yet old enough to write a letter himself. So I composed a letter in his name and sent it to Mir Ali through someone. He was most pleased with the letter. He got our tenants released and he sent two senior and responsible people to our place so that the case would be resolved through arbitration. *Karta* was absent all this while. I was scared because I had been responsible for such a major decision without ascertaining his intentions. I knew nothing about lawsuits. That suit had been dragging on all this while and nobody had tried to resolve it in this way. It had also been done in *Karta's* absence without his permission. Maybe he would be furious when he came home. My heart trembled

in fear and anxiety. He came home in a few days. Those who had acted as intermediaries in the matter had no worries, but I was terrified. When he heard that I have been instrumental in resolving the generations old dispute with Mir Ali, he was most pleased with me. He was, in fact, an important man. He passed away, leaving much good work unfinished. These are a few words about *Karta's* life.

Notes

1. The Introduction is written by Jyotirindranath Tagore, the elder brother of Rabindranath, and an important literary figure in his own right. Neither Rashsundari nor Jyotirindranath mention how he came to be asked to write it.
2. Literally, the kind slayer of Madhu. Madhu was a demon whom the Lord Vishnu, the God who preserves Creation, had killed. Here it refers to the domestic deity.
3. This was the first biography of the medieval Bhakti saint Shri Chaitanya who was later deified by a large section of Bengali Vaishnavs. It was written by Vrindaban Das around 1548. See Kanchan Basu, ed, *Shri Chaitanya Bhagabat*, Reflect Publishers, Calcutta, 1986.
4. The confusion at this point arises because of Rashsundari's inability to distinguish between levels in divinity. Since the family idol is Dayamadhav, she imagines that he is a household property, and cannot see how he can belong to all.
5. Saraswati is the Goddess of learning, wife of Brahma.
6. This means that Saraswati should inspire her speech. Since sacred knowledge (the *Vedas*) was orally transmitted, and because in the traditional institutions of higher Sanskrit learning, teaching was largely orally dispensed, conventionally, the throat is seen as the seat of learning.
7. This should be 1809 and 1896, according to the Gregorian

calendar. She follows the Bengali traditional calendar in putting down dates. The only dates that are given, relate to her birth and to her present age.

8. The river that flowed through her home district was actually Padma, a tributary of the sacred river Ganga. In the absence of the main river channel, people referred to it as Ganga. It is considered a pious act to walk to the sacred river for a bath. People would travel some distance to do so, and they would usually bring their own food for the journey. Rashsundari must have seen such , travellers, walking towards Ganga. She is implying here that she was too young then to realise the religious meaning of the bath.
9. It means that she is a spoilt child.
10. Since her family was rich, the village school must have met at their house. It was customary for such elementary schools or pathshalas that taught some Bengali and indigenous arithmetic, to meet at spaces provided by the rich people of the village rather than in a building of their own.
11. Even though most little girls would be wearing the sari, some initially wore a pleated long skirt with a scarf on top for the sake of modesty, before they graduated to the sari.
12. At *pathshalas*, boys were taught first to scratch out letters on the earth. At a slightly more advanced stage, they would write on plantain leaves, and then on palm leaves. Only the most advanced of them, in some places, had access to handmade paper. All the lessons were recited loudly for purposes of memorisation. Blackboards and textbooks came into use much later, and only in some places.
13. White conch-shell bangles are put on once a girl marries, it is a sign of her married status. Widows take them off and they are not allowed to wear any ornaments.
14. Neither widows nor unmarried girls wear conch-shell bangles or the vermilion mark on the forehead. However, unmarried girls wear ornaments, colourful saris, and there are hundreds

of differences in dress, diet and behaviour to mark them out from widows. Rashsundari uses the incident to underline her ignorance of wordly custom, her innocence of the basic facts of domestic life.

15. A mode of address, directed to men of high status.
16. A woman is not allowed to utter the name of her husband or of her male relatives on the husband's side.
17. Corpses are brought on new cots with new bedding on them. After the cremation, these are left behind at the ghat or river bank. Cremation always takes place at the river bank, wherever possible, preferably at the Ganga. Funeral pyres are built up of logs on which clarified butter or ghee is poured before the fire is lit. Considered an impure and polluting place, where the untouchable Chandal caste is in charge of the work, it is also a place full of oppressive associations, of many smells and sights that evoke dead bodies and burning. It is a place of dread, especially at night. The presence of mats, etc, is a reminder that a corpse had been cremated fairly recently.
18. Palanquins are carriages borne by four to eight men. It was a more comfortable mode of transport than the bullock cart, and horse-drawn carriages were rare on the country roads. Brides conventionally go away in palanquins for, closed as they are, they ensure complete privacy. Here she probably means that she was placed in the same palanquin as her husband.
19. After the wedding ceremony was over and the ritual at the groom's house had been completed, it was customary for the bride to return to her natal home and stay there until she reached her puberty.
20. This probably means that she could not visit her natal home for two whole years.
21. Father's home is the literal term for the natal home and this is what she uses even though she was fatherless.
22. Among the Vaishnav sect, recitation of the many names of the

- Lord is the most important path to salvation in the modern, degenerate age of Kali.
23. This means that they would be exempted from domestic duties, but would fetch and carry things to the field, look after the cattle, fetch water, etc.
 24. All landowners had an office (*cutchlery*) for accounting, receiving rent and produce, and also for trying petty, local cases informally, since they had lost their formal judicial powers with the Permanent Settlement of 1793. Nonetheless, their informal powers were considerable, and they were, most of the time, a law unto themselves.
 25. The domestic deity or idol would have daily worship ritually enacted, and the arrangements usually were the wife's responsibility, even though the act of worship would be performed by an upper caste male relative or the priest. He would also be offered daily ritual meals that had to be cooked separately under conditions of great purity.
 26. The last and most degenerate of ages in the Hindu four-age cycle, after which a new cycle begins all over again.
 27. She is quite precise about when exactly she grew up. She had her first son when she was eighteen and, possibly, that raised her status.
 28. The head of the household, in this case, her husband.
 29. A low, agricultural caste.
 30. For women, their eating was an activity that needed to be done away from male eyes and never to be talked about in public.
 31. She means that it would be strictly stipulated beforehand about how long she could stay and she must obey that stipulation.
 32. Brahma who is God the Creator, has five mouths.
 33. The Puranas—sacred law books, and the Tantras—books of esoteric ritual practices.
 34. Note how easily and unselfconsciously she slips in the *Koran* with Hindu religious texts.

35. Pages of the manuscripts were not sewn or tied together, but were pressed inside heavy wooden slats. Taking out a page was possible without damaging the book.
36. Here she uses the significant word, *jitakshar* which means one who has mastered the word. There is a word that is somewhat analogous in construction and that is a familiar word in religious discourses: *jitendriya* or one who has mastered the senses. She probably had that construction in mind and stretched it to substitute 'word' for 'senses'. I have not come across this word elsewhere, nor is it in the better-known dictionaries.
37. She says this because of her experience of the village school, where students were taught to write out the letters first and then to memorise them one by one. Writing was, then, the first step to reading and one would read what one wrote down. In the absence of blackboards, the teacher did not have to write out anything for the students to read, he would help them with shaping letters. Later, he would recite memorised passages which they would take down to practise writing and spelling. Nor were primers used at all in traditional *pathshalas*.
38. Silent reading was unusual. At schools, lessons were recited aloud, and manuscripts—mostly religious or philosophical—were chanted out. With printed books came the habit of silent reading, even though, to this day, lessons are usually loudly recited to help memorise them.
39. A married woman would rarely be addressed by her own name. Each relative would use the precise kinship connection and for a senior person, her status within the household would be the common mode of address.
40. It was, and still is, largely customary for widows to return to their natal homes.
41. Within the kinship network, a woman's status and seniority depends on her husband's seniority. Even if she is much younger than his brothers and sisters, if her husband is older, then she is addressed and treated as a person who is senior to them.

42. During the day, neither the husband nor the older male relatives are meant to see the face of the wife which is covered by the sari. Rashesundari, being somewhat ignorant about the complexities of protocol, did not understand how far the prohibition was to be extended.
43. In a landlord's family, the produce rent in paddy as well as the harvest from directly managed lands would be stored in the inner courtyard. The scattered bits of leftover corn would be used as fodder.
44. Prohibitions wear off gradually with the birth of sons. In her case, she clung to them longer than usual. They would include speaking in whispers, especially to older persons, and, in general, keeping silent whenever possible and speaking only when asked a question.
45. The land of the demons that Lord Ram, an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, destroyed, according to the epic *Ramayana*.
46. The wicked cousins of the Pandavas in the epic *Mahabharata* who were defeated by the righteous Pandavas.
47. In one of his incarnations as a midget, Lord Vishnu had approached the King Bali, known for his legendary charity, and asked for the gift of a measure of land that would be covered by three steps taken by him. Amused by the midget's demand, Bali had promised him that land. Vishnu then assumed his true dimensions: his first step covered the earth and the second covered the heavens. When he asked Bali where the third step should be taken, Bali prostrated himself and asked him to place his feet on his head. This is a translation from a Sanskrit couplet, but I am not certain if it is her own translation, or if this was then a common Bengali saying.
48. With the entry of a new bride into the house, her new-found powers were visibly confirmed, as the restrictions on the newcomer were both a reminder of her own new freedom, and of the distance that she had travelled from the days of her youth. It also put another human being entirely under her control.

49. This refers to the sexual division of the household space in rich families where the outer parts of the house may be located in another building, separated by a courtyard from the inner quarters where the women resided and which the household men would use for rest and sleep.
50. Reading out from manuscripts, especially sacred ones, is always made audible since it is supposed to be a public act of worship. Since only a few could read, and manuscript reading was a time-consuming and cumbrous activity, its reach was meant to include many others who could not read. So far, she had engaged in silent reading, a most unusual way of reading manuscripts, for reasons of secrecy. For the first time, the secret activity and achievement was going to be proclaimed to others.
51. Respectable families did not teach their women to sing and neither did they ever hum since female singing was associated with the work of prostitutes and of public, professional singers of low castes and presumably of dubious morals.
52. *Annaprashan*, one of the ten major life-cycle rites for upper-caste Hindus. Usually performed when the child is six months old, it is a ritual feeding of the child with rice that symbolises food and wealth.
53. The word used here is *putrashok* which literally means mourning a son. There is no composite word in Bengali to signify the death of a daughter or the loss of a child of either sex. Since she refers to the death of the daughter as well, she uses the term in a generic sense.
54. September, 1873, by the Gregorian calendar.
55. The fabulous, life-giving tree mentioned in the sacred epic *Ramayana* which was located on the Gandhamadan mountain.
56. All are late medieval Bengali Vaishnav devotional texts.
57. Since she had only read the stylised calligraphy of handwritten manuscripts so far, she initially could not follow printed matter.

It was small print and the print used letters that had been standardised in such a way that it bore little relationship to the form of the letters in calligraphic writing.

58. This is Banaras, the great Saivite pilgrimage centre.

59. The dresses that a woman wears at different stages of her life are markedly different from each other. An unmarried girl would not wear a veil, would wear very simple saris and few ornaments. Her movements would be free and supple. For a long while, a new bride wears bright saris, usually with strong red borders, and a lot of ornaments, including conch shell bangles and an iron bangle on her left wrist. She also wears sindhoor, the red vermillion paste or powder on her hair parting and a vermillion circular mark on her forehead. She hardly speaks, and does so in a very low voice. Her movements are stiff, unobtrusive and muted. An elderly woman (a woman in her early thirties would count as elderly, there's a Bengali saying that at twenty a woman turns old) would wear white saris with a coloured border and her veil would be shorter and her movements relatively more free. A widow would wear speckless white and no ornaments or marks in the parting of her hair or on her forehead. Her diet is free offish and meat and other "strong" food, and she fasts once every fortnight and goes without a proper dinner. Since she is regarded as a sign of bad luck, she cannot attend a number of ritual occasions and ceremonies.

60. This is the onset of her sexually active years and the time of childbearing. She refers obliquely to her nubile body.

61. Brahma is the Lord of Creation, Vishnu preserves Creation and Shiva or Maheshwar destroys it to begin another cycle. However, despite this tripartite theogony, there is an overlay of belief in a single divinity. The two levels often coexist in religious thinking. Fate is often conceptualised as a deity who visits each infant after birth and inscribes its fate on its forehead though no one can decipher the inscription, and none can alter it.

62. Widows were expected to tonsure their heads.
63. February 1869, on a day of the annual ritual worship of Shiva.
64. Here Time refers not to physical changes which she had commented on earlier, and which had been abundant, but to social status.
65. The ultimate soul, the only reality, according to monists.
66. In fables, snakes carry a jewel on their heads. This expression commonly denotes a great loss.
67. This refers to *karmaphal*, or the fruits of karma, the notion that the deeds of one life are rewarded or punished in the next.
68. I have left out the verses here.
69. Life of Chaitanya.
70. Ritually, death should take place under the open skies. Ideally, a person should be taken to the shores of Ganga to breathe her last, but where that is not possible, the dying person is carried into the courtyard and is placed beside the sacred tulsi plant before the last rites are conducted.
71. A zamindari official, in charge of the accounts of the estate.
72. The superstition is that ghosts are abroad only at night time.
73. This is not a cosmic statement. Within a household, the senior-most woman is called 'mother' by all.
74. This probably means that since death was coming soon, that would constitute the next and last landmark in the story of her life.
75. Shantipur and Nabadwip are important pilgrimage centres in Bengal, associated with the life of Chaitanya. Vrindaban is on the banks of Yamuna, in present day Uttar Pradesh. According to Vaishnav belief, Lord Krishna spent his childhood and youth here, sporting among milkmaids and cowherds. It is the holiest of pilgrimages for Bengali Vaishnavs.
76. These are major pilgrimages in Bihar and in Uttar Pradesh in North India.
77. This is the name of the Vaishnav heaven.

78. Benaras is another name for Kashi. Kailash is supposed to be the abode of Lord Shiva.
79. The name of the great Goddess Durga, referring to her role as food giver. Here she probably has the renowned temple of Annapurna at Benaras in mind.
80. Another name of Lord Shiva.
81. A stretch of territory, lying on both sides of the Yamuna, with Vrindaban and Mathura on two sides of the river. The entire area is associated with the childhood, youth and adult life of Krishna.
82. This refers to the European indigo planters who were feared and hated by peasants and landlords alike.

Excerpts from the Second Part

First Composition



...I was born in the month of Chaitra, in the year 1216. It is now 1303.¹ I am, thanks be to God, now eighty-eight years old. I came into this Bharatbarsha and I have spent such a long time here, but I still belong to that old frame.² I think that there are very few of my contemporaries left in our land. It is doubtful if even one is left.

I came into this Bharatbarsha and I have spent eighty-eight years here. The Great Lord has compressed the burden of three different life spans within a single lifetime. I must admit that I am extremely fortunate in this respect....³



Third Composition



... My Lord, today I witnessed one of your miracles. Kind One, my heart is stony, but your miracle has melted down even that stone with delight...

All this is stowed away inside my mind, others know

nothing of this. That is why I will talk about it in some detail. In our past, customs were different, now people dress very differently. Anyway, I used to own a nose-ring that was shaped like the crescent moon. Three similar rings were attached to the main one.

There is a pond close to this house. I had gone for my bath there one day. I was up to my neck in the water, washing clothes, when suddenly that nose-ring got entangled with my clothes and fell off. Lots of people immediately collected to look for it. They got into the pond and hunted for the ring. It could not be found at all. I knew that it was gone forever, there was no way that I would get it back.

I was twenty-two years old at that time. I already had two sons, after which eight more sons and two daughters were born to me. Later, the pond silted up gradually, and became useless. It was filled with shrubbery and slowly it turned into a patch of wilderness.

Many years later, my fifth son Dwarkanath—the one who works at Goari Krishnagore—renovated the pond. The bed was dug up afresh, and the loose earth was piled up next to the pond. After a while, a wall was built with the earth.

Much later, part of the wall collapsed, though half of it continued to stand. It was then discovered that my lost nose-ring was lying flat on top of the broken wall.

Rain had washed away all the earth and mud that had covered it. It could be partly seen. I was standing on the steps of the pond, I could see it a bit. There was a girl from the fisherman's family, I asked her, "What is that?" She ran and got it for me.

I took it in my hand, and I realised that it was, indeed, my lost nose-ring. I was overwhelmed. I cannot describe what I felt like at that moment. My eyes filled up, I wiped away my tears and gazed at it.

My heart trembled at this sign of the miracle that the Great Lord had worked. I had seen with my own eyes that the ring had dropped off into the water when I was twenty-two. I got it back when I was eighty-two. Even after these sixty years, the ring was utterly unchanged, the golden colour hadn't rusted at all. What a wonder!

Is there anything that the Great Lord cannot do? For sixty whole years the ring had been lost in the water, I never even dreamt that I would get it back. It was not a possibility.

Where was it all these sixty years? Who brought it back to me after sixty years? It had spent sixty years in water, earth and mud, the earth had been worked over so many times. It had been taken out from the pond, many feet had stamped on it to soften it into mud, the mud went into the wall next to the pond. The ring had stayed inside the wall. With all the pulling about this way and that, it had remained just as it used to be. Had it been with me, it would have been broken and ruined by now.

... My Lord, you have shown such mercy to this wretched sinner, to Rashsundari! When I took the ring, I felt as if I was holding the moon from the heavens in my hands. Don't ever think that it was because I had got back the gold. I was happy that the Great Lord had been so kind to me. I began to think, where would I keep this, what is the best place? I will not melt it down, I'll keep it intact. But it will be for Madangopal.⁴ It was too big for the nose, so it was attached to the crown on his head. It looked wonderful.

My Lord, Madangopal, you had kept the ring with great care so that you could restore it to your vassal, your daughter. You gave it back to me after sixty years. I took it and I felt that it is you who have come to me.



Eighth Composition



... I have spent a long time in Bharatbarsha. I am still here. How can I explain the states of my body and my mind over the years? He alone knows, for he is always there, ever present in my innermost being.

How was my body in the old days? It is a very old story, it is irrelevant now. If I were to talk about it now, the modern women will say that she is boasting. That isn't true, nobody should ever think that. Let me say a bit about how we were meant to work and how we worked in the old days: also how my body used to be then.

In the old days, women were not allowed to read. People of those times would say: "What on earth is this? A woman studying? But it is so wrong, it leads to disaster, women should not even touch pen and paper." That was the rule everywhere.

Now the Great Lord has decreed new rules, I find them most satisfying. Girls suffer from nothing these days, the rules are much better. Now, even if one has only one daughter, she is educated with great care. I find it wonderful. In those days, we were not educated, I am not an educated person. I don't even understand the significance of education, we had nothing to do with such things, we only did the household chores.

I am still in the same household where I have spent so many years. It is no mean household. Madanmohan resides here, meals are cooked to feed his image, lots of guests keep coming and going.

My mother-in-law was ill, she could not see. So I had to care for two divine images.⁵

I had no brothers-in-law, but there were three sisters-in-law. I was the only one at home.⁶ At that time, the sisters-in-law were in their own homes. Our household had about twenty to twenty-five servants and maidservants, their food had to be cooked twice a day. In those days, we didn't employ Brahmin cooks.⁷ All the cooking had to be done at home. Every single household chore had its own set of rules, and I observed every one of them. At the same time, I had ten sons and two daughters. The entire responsibility for bringing up the twelve of them was upon me.

About nine maidservants worked for us, but all of them did chores outside the home. There was no help inside, I had to do everything myself. The Karta would not have anything at all after his morning bath and worship, he only relished rice.⁸ So I needed to cook rice for him in the morning.

I did all of that by myself. I would cook in the morning, then I would feed the children. I would then have my bath, and then I would make all the arrangements for Madanmohan's meal. I would also prepare everything for my mother-in-law's meal and I would keep it all ready in front of her.⁹ Then I would go into the kitchen. First I would cook for Karta, then I would cook the rest. I did all the chores of that household. I wanted to please everybody.

Merciful Lord, you showed such mercy to this slave, you endowed me with such perfect physical health. I could do the work of ten by myself, without any sense of fatigue. Ocean of mercy, friend of the poor, Hari, you fortified me like a rock. I had no ailments at all. Now let me tell you how that body fires at this moment.



Ninth Composition



The worn-out body can hardly walk
 The world goes dark if I try to stand up
 God is trying this body of mine
 No limb moves as before
 Little by little, such a state has come about
 That all the ten senses are ready to depart
 Gluttony, unfortunately, refuses to leave
 Brother Belly is looking around with great eagerness.
 My jewel of a daughter is always ready with her services
 She provides me with everything that I need...



Tenth Composition



Theatre of Life¹⁰

Lord of the world, Protector of the world, source of Creation, Preservation and Destruction!¹¹ You are the *adhikari*, the manager and proprietor of the theatre of Life. *Adhikari*, our master, your will is everything, everything follows your will. You drew me in among your actors, and you have also given me a seat among the audience. I have been there for the last eighty-eight years.

Adhikari, this is a most curious theatre. You have shown yourself in so many different roles, costumes. At first, you assumed the roles of my parents, brothers, sisters, relatives, near and dear ones. You brought them to me and then you took me away from them. Who can tell what you are going to do; who knows when the curtains will come down, which play is going to come to an end. No one else can know any of this. *Adhikari*,

you took away all my dear ones, after you had brought them to me. I was filled with pain. But you soothed it away.

After a while, you dressed me up as a mother and gave me the chief role. As soon as you gave me directions, I dressed up as Mother, and came on stage to perform my role. I have been watching so many wonderful roles that people play in your theatre.

There is no end to the marvellous plays that your theatre performs. I have been made to play so many roles. You brought in beings dressed up as my sons, daughters, grandchildren. You showed them to me, and then you took away almost all of them.

Adhikari, you brought my son onto the stage, and came to me while the play was on. You said, "Take this son, take him in your arms, he is yours, I give him to you." I took him in my arms and I was filled with joy beyond measure. I have no words to describe such happiness.

Adhikari, you know well the excruciating pain that one goes through to bear a son. But it evaporates the moment one looks at the face of the child, when one holds him in one's arms. My whole being is bathed in joy when I sit with him on my lap. Joy, indeed, overflows, I think that I am now truly someone. Let alone everything else, *Adhikari*, I even forget about you.

With him in my arms, I feel I do matter, I feel as if I am holding the moon in my hands. Then I truly feel that this home, this household, all this does, indeed, belong to me. My body dances with joy, my mind keeps in step with it. I forget about my own body as a separate thing. I hold my child at my breast, I feel he is dearer to me than my own life.

Adhikari, who can describe your many qualities? Soon after this, you snatch away my son from my breast, from my arms. I

do not know where you had brought him from, I do not know where you take him away. When you take him away from my arms, I wish that you had taken away my life as well, I wish to lose everything that I have along with him. What unnatural pain lashes out at such times! Nothing else compares with that. Only those who have gone through that pain know what it is like. And you know, as well. . .

One of your names is the Merciful One. It is chanted across the three worlds. I have to call you that even when you are merciless...



Eleventh Composition



Adhikari, you have many faces. Only you can tell what kind of a role you will play in this theatre. In the Dwapar age, you appeared as Krishnachandra in your theatre of life. You came to Mathura to be born from Devaki's womb. As soon as you were born in Kansa's prison, you manifested yourself to Devaki and Vasudev as the Four Armed God, decked out in conch-shell, weapons and the lotus flower... You were united with the cowherds and milkmaids in sweet Vrindavan, you played with the children on the banks of the Yamuna, in the forests, you grazed the cattle with them... I am but a lowly creature, moreover, I am a mere woman. How can I comprehend the wonder of your sport in the land of Vraj?¹²



Twelfth Composition



...When Satya, Treta and Dwapar ages were done, and when the age of Kali began, you were born to Shachi and Jagannath

Mishra at Nabadwip. Your name was entirely a different one now, and you came with the holy name of Tarakbrahma Hari on your lips. As Gourangachandra, you sang the name of Hari all over the world. That name saved many sinners, poor and miserable people, blind and sick sufferers... In this Kali age, your old dark form has been gilded, you have come to play your role in the theatre as the fair Gourchandra.¹³

Thirteenth Composition



...The earth was awash with love With the name of Tarak Brahma Hari. Blessed, blessed be this Kali age...



Fifteenth Composition



I was born in the month of Chaitra in 1216. I am eighty-five years old now, in this year of 1303. A little has been written about the states of my body and mind, about my life in the first sixty years. It is, indeed, necessary to write about the next twenty-five years as well... This is the end of the second part of the account of my life. After my death, anyone who wishes to do so from my family, may complete the last part.

After the book is published, whatever is left over from meeting the costs of printing, should be invested. As long as my sons are alive they will bear out my wishes. After them, someone from my lineage will use the money for an annual sacred feast in the honour of Madangopal...

Notes

1. According to the Gregorian calendar, she was born in 1808, and it is now 1896.
2. This means that she is still inhabiting her old body.
3. This is a most unconventional statement, since a widow is meant to consider her life a curse which a kind fate should end quickly.
4. This is the name of the family deity here. It refers to Krishna as a lover, so the idol would wear a lot of ornaments.
5. One would be Madangopal, the other would be the mother-in-law. She is indicating that she treated her mother-in-law like a divine being.
6. This means that she was the only able-bodied woman in the family who was available for all the household chores.
7. Brahmin professional cooks were in high demand because the food cooked by them would pollute no one. But this was an urban—mostly Calcutta—custom, and in the households of the rural gentry, the women of the family would do the entire cooking.
8. In East Bengal, people would often prefer a meal of rice for breakfast. Since this was for the head of the household, it had to be freshly cooked every day.
9. Very pious widows would always cook for themselves, however ill or old. But the preparations could be done by a relative or a woman from the same caste.
10. The word is *yatra*, which means journey as well as roving theatre that became a very popular art form in rural areas and small towns from the nineteenth century.
11. Hindu theogony privileges the divine triumvirate: Brahma the Creator, Vishnu the Preserver, Shiva the Destroyer. Each age goes through these three phases, after which a new cycle begins again.
12. This passage refers to the theory of incarnations of Lord Vishnu

who was born as Krishna in the third age of Dwapar, in a four-age time cycle, to rid the earth of the wicked king Kansa of Mathura. He was born to Devaki and Vasudev, the sister and brother-in-law of Kansa. Forewarned of his fate, Kansa had them imprisoned before Devaki gave birth, plotting to kill the newborn infant. On his birth, Krishna miraculously manifested his true form to his parents and got the prison gates opened for a little while. Vasudev waded across the river with the baby and left him in the care of cowherd foster parents at Vrindavan. Krishna spent an idyllic childhood and youth there, playing with cowherds, and engaging in erotic sport with the milkmaids, the descriptions of which form the staple of Bengali Baishnab contemplation and devotion (Vrajleela). Later, he went to Mathura, killed Kansa and assumed kingship, leaving his friends at Vraj or Vrindaban in a state of eternal longing.

13. This refers to the Bengali Vaishnav belief that the sixteenth century saint Nimai-Gouranga, the Krishna-maddened devotee and founder of the Chaitanya cult and sect, was actually yet another incarnation of Vishnu. This view, however, is not present among all Vaishnav orders.