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Nivedan – A Plea

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Translated
into English by

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FOREWORD

Call it a memoir, travelogue or diary; Acharya Kosambi's Nivedan is unarguably a sterling example of strikingly unassuming and highly incisive autobiographical writing...

...endearing and enduring in the same breath, highly informative but equally humorous, brutally honest but never unceremonious, intimate in description and infinite in inspiration and most important, devoid of the vanity that knowingly or unknowingly seeps into any writing of the said genre. The emotion wrapped in his words is as remarkable as the discipline of his idiom.

I am deeply indebted to Shri. Prasad V Lolayekar, Director, Art & Culture, Government of Goa for his support and encouragement during the making of this e-book which is intended for free distribution over the internet. I am also thankful to Mr. Amar Ambani, Head – Research, IIFL for publicising this e-book through the *IIFL Knowledge Initiatives* program, a one-of-its-kind project to promote quality literature across verticals and spheres free of cost for the benefit of knowledge seekers and scholars spread across the globe. Credit is also due to Ms. Meera Kosambi's translation titled Nivedan: The

Autobiography of Dharmanand Kosambi (published by Permanent Black and distributed by Orient Blackswan) which helped me double-check the accuracy of certain names of people and places cited in the original.

I sincerely hope my English translation reproduces the meticulous details - if not the mesmerising charm - of Acharya's flowing, first-hand account of incredible people experiences and parochial peculiarities in the course of his knowledge-seeking penance across different regions of India, Nepal, Burma, Sri Lanka and America. The only liberty I have taken is to call his memoir 'A Plea' since it is, more than a travel account, also an humble appeal to his fellow countrymen to try and delve deep before aspiring to soar high, whether in material life or on the elusive path of spiritual ascension. Beyond doubt, the Acharya's heartfelt plea would inspire even the most casual of readers to re-examine the purpose and significance of their lives in the guiding light of his example.

Sudhir Raikar
July 11, 2014

Preface

A weekly periodical called *Bharat*¹ was published from Goa. It was run by a group of promising young activists during the initial years. When I returned from my first visit to the US, they urged me to write a serialized column on my wide-ranging experiences from the time I left my native place of Sankhval till my return from America. Conceding to their request, I wrote one or two chapters under the title *Majha Prawaas* (My Journeys) for the editor's perusal. My text, in his reckoning, read more like a personal chronicle than a travel account and he rechristened it *Atma Vritta* (My Memoir). But the editor of *Bharat*'s Marathi section Shri Shambarao Krishnaji Sardesai², in the very second instalment of the series, changed the title to *Atma Nivedan* (My Plea).

Barring the expansive foreword that spanned the first two instalments, I chiefly intended to focus on my varied travel experiences. 'My Journeys' thus would not have proved inappropriate in the given context. But I didn't oppose the name given by Shri Shambarao under which 13 instalments, and part of the 14th, were eventually published in *Bharat*.

¹ Renowned bilingual published from Panaji 1913 to 1917, and later from Kepe 1920 to 1949. Languages: Marathi and Portuguese

² Leading intellectual essayist, editor and fiction writer from Goa

Many of my Gomantak friends and acquaintances, however, fondly addressed the column simply as *Nivedan* (A Plea). This title, I felt, is more in line with my purpose and hence I have named the book so.

Nivedan was published in *Bharat* from November 1912 till February 9, 1916. The reason behind the unduly long span was the ongoing world war that made *Bharat*'s publication intermittent. I used to write chapters one after another in sequential fashion but following the decision to visit America yet again, I completed five chapters at one go (14 till 18) in the year 1916 or 1917 and handed them over to my friend Vishnu Ramchandra Naik³. I intended to publish the consolidated text in book form with his help. The wish didn't materialize owing to several hurdles and the manuscript lay idle at his place for long. When I lost all hope of getting the book published from Goa, I dispatched the 13 episodes published in *Bharat* and the succeeding five chapters to another friend Shri Damodar Raghunath Mitra⁴. I genuinely believe he has endorsed his unabiding love for me by publishing this memoir in book form.

³ Lawyer by profession and a leading activist

⁴ Originally from Bardesh in Goa. Founder of the Marathi magazine 'Manoranjan' in Mumbai

Nivedan makes a passing mention of a few gentlemen and monks who were otherwise kind and generous to me but also caused me distress and disappointment at times. I could have avoided the allusion; many would certainly feel in hindsight. Let me make it clear that my intention is not to bring disrepute to my friends and supporters. I have heartfelt respect for them and most of them are aware of this fact. It was only but natural for my patrons to assume that my chosen path was opposed to conventional wisdom, inevitably destined for failure. Yet they never disowned me and in fact still retain their love for me. I am also indebted to Shri Vittal Jiwaji Nadkarni⁵ for his prompt and scrupulous help in proof reading.

Dharmanand Kosambi, Puratatwa Mandir, Ahmedabad,

July 5, 1924

⁵ Author of several religious books including 'Narendranath'

1. EARLY YEARS

I was born at around 4.00 am on October 9, 1876 in Sankhval, a tiny hamlet in the Sasasht (Salsette) province of Goa. My mother Anandibai and father Damodar had seven issues in all, two sons and five daughters. I was the youngest of the lot. My mother fell ill immediately after my birth and my nanny had to feed me to ensure my survival, so I am told. When I was about six months old, my left leg, all of a sudden, developed a pus-filled swelling. Roki Miskita, an Ayurvedic practitioner from Kansuv, removed the pus by cutting open part of my knee. The wound healed in due course but my leg remained weak for life.

When my grandfather Ramchandra Kosambe first arrived at Sankhval, the place was nothing more than a deserted piece of land. There was significant development during the course of my childhood but the dense forest cover remained and it was commonplace to hear tiger roars in the evenings. Adjacent to our house was a tiny shop run by a gentleman called Subray Kamat. To our south lived Bhiku Shenvi Sanzgiri with his family of three dependants - two daughters and a

granddaughter - all widowed. He had no son. Another of our neighbours was Narayan Shenvi Sanzgiri. (Currently, his son stays there and has carried out major repairs to the original structure.) Barring these three Brahmin households, we had a handful of Hindu and Christian Sudras in close vicinity. I hardly mixed with the Christian boys; probably my father had prohibited me from doing so. There was little restriction in the case of Hindu Sudras; I am inclined to believe, for I distinctly remember having mingled with them on many occasions. I was unanimously considered the dumbest of all my friends, rather among all boys of the village. I couldn't eat my food on my own till the age of 8 or 9. If my friends bullied me, I never complained to my folks. It would be more apt to say I was wholly incapable of bringing any complaint home. I recall my father's friends often telling him in explicit terms what a big burden I was on his head.

My father didn't seem to share the sentiment. As a son, I was dull enough to disappoint any normal father who has normal expectations from his child, yet he was pretty much hopeful

that my aptitude would manifest itself sooner or later. A native astrologer had predicted that I would become intelligent in good time but wealth and riches would always elude me. If not anything better, I would certainly rise to the post of the village *KulKarni* (escrivao da comunidade⁶) he earnestly felt.

He was keen on providing me with a good education but was not sure how to go about it. My first alphabetic lessons began on a rough-and-ready slate. I was shifted to Madgaon for a while where I was introduced to a few primary school books. Soon after, I was sent to my sister's place at Chikli⁷. Here I attended the school run by a master named Bhik Bhatji. When he had exhausted all his knowledge reserves, I was enrolled into Raghoba Gopal Prabhu's school in Aroba⁸. I was 9 or 10 by that time. Prabhu was a disciplinarian but revered for his depth of knowledge. He took a liking for me and fondly called me *Bhendyachi Bhaji* (A Ladies finger preparation) after my soft and sweet nature like the vegetable. I was here barely for two or three months. The school was located on the other side of the river and I was late for my classes every other day. Worse, I fell ill soon after and stopped going to

6 Portuguese name for village accountant

7 A hamlet in Bardesh province of Goa

8 A village in Pedne province of Goa

school. Despite the brief stint, most of my learning happened at this very school. Of all subjects, I developed a special liking for Mathematics. At the school, I had learnt concepts up to trinomials but even later at home I could solve decimal problems with remarkable ease.

Owing to my ill health, I was brought back to Sankhval. After about six months to one year at home, I was moved to my sister's place at Shahapur of Belgaum district in the year 1888. There I was enrolled in the second standard of Marathi medium. Not surprisingly, I stood first in my class as I could easily solve the mathematics of Standard V. I secured first rank in all subjects excluding physical training. Post that year's annual examination, I was promoted directly to standard V. Here again, I topped the class but my stay proved short-lived like before. I fell ill and had to be moved back to Goa. I later learnt that most of my Shahapur colleagues didn't even complete their matriculation barring Shri Nagesh Vasudev Gunaji⁹ who went on to earn the coveted B A LLB degree.

Back at Goa, I half-heartedly attended a Portuguese school on one or two occasions but simply could not come to terms with the Portuguese language. I was keen on learning Sanskrit

9 A renowned lawyer, Congress activist and writer, a close disciple of Mahatma Gandhi in later years

but was unable to do anything about it. Finally my tryst with schooling ended for good. My father didn't force me to think otherwise either. Probably he had, by now, given up on his dream of making me the village accountant.



2. YOUTHFUL PRIME

‘Is there anyone in this vast universe whose youth was devoid of yen?’- Banhatt’s Kadambari

People in Western countries would laugh at you lest you considered a boy of fourteen or a girl of twelve years among adults. Even a madman from our ancient times wouldn't have dared to proclaim this age group as adult. But time has its own peculiar ways of ushering in unwarranted change. It's common today to find several 16-year old fathers and 14-year old mothers in our midst. So if I said I was a grown up at 14, it shouldn't come as a surprise to my Maharashtrian readers at least. By adult, I am not implying the tell-tale growth in physical terms. What I mean to say is I was gripped with all those lures that one is naturally susceptible to at that vulnerable age. Many of my peers had entered into wedlock by now; some others took to probing the deeper truth of the institution called matrimony. And the adventurous among us believed in taking practical lessons from the *Devdasis* (hierodulic courtesans) of the village. How could I have remained unripe and unmindful in

this stimulating environment?

My father had acquired a coconut farm on a lease of 90 years, a few miles away from our house. He used to visit it twice a day and I began accompanying him in the course of time. Our principle duty on the farm was to safeguard the coconuts from monkeys and thieves. In our spare time, we did the usual stuff like turning on the water supply, watering plants or repairing the compound wall as and when required. Gradually I learnt to climb up the trees as well. Whenever my father was not at home, I invariably rushed to the farm. Daytime never posed any problem at the farm but I was filled with fear the moment it turned dark. Hence I returned home only in the company of the Bhandari community folks who were entrusted with the job of plucking coconuts and cleaning their crowns. This unwarranted company at nightfall had an adverse effect on my psyche. Not that I began to consume toddy or indulged in other unacceptable practices but their profane and pedestrian language indirectly influenced my mind with wicked thoughts. The fear of my elders at home

prevented me from doing anything untoward but the ensuing cerebral pollution got me stuck to a few bad habits for life.

Probably towards the end of 1891, I don't remember exactly when, I developed a new found interest in reading books. Nobody was instrumental for this hobby of mine that soon turned into a habit; just that I was instinctively drawn to it. My first book was *Arabi BhashetiL Suras Va Chamatkarik Goshti* (Arabic tales of fun and fantasy). The next one was Ramchandra Pandurang Vaidya's¹⁰ monthly magazine *Pathyabodh*¹¹. A poem titled *Gupt Rog* (Venereal disease) published in it caught my attention. My mind now wandered in the half-baked comprehension of the subject matter and all of a sudden, I hated those very things that I fancied in the past. Before I could come to terms with the new reality, I entered into wedlock in June 1891. The definitive seal of adulthood was finally etched on my forehead.

As the horizon of my reading universe expanded, the mounting vortex of existential questions made me even more restless. Icons like Vishnushastri and Agarkar did the country proud with their great deeds; could I even dream of doing

something similar? How could I when I was wholly incapable of matching their intellect, enthusiasm and courage. If so, did an average human being like me, given my animal-like predisposition, have any right to be alive? Was it not fitting to put an end to my insignificant life with an intake of poison? On the one hand, I lacked the courage to devour poison and on the other, I could not extinguish the rising flames of deep anxiety that scorched me day and night. Perplexed and petrified, I would often wake up in the middle of the night to find my heart thumping furiously. The consequent anxiety invariably caused me sleeplessness. I took to the *Gudgudi* (a native Hookah device made from gourds) as a possible antidote but it actually made the palpitations even worse.

Ramnath is the presiding deity of our household who's worshipped at a temple in Bandivade. Every Dussera, a *Gurav* (Non-Brahmin priest) of the place is believed to rescue victims from the evil powers of ghosts and spirits. My father, an ardent devotee of Ramnath, unconditionally believed in the *Gurav's* sorcery. We went to the temple on the occasion of Dussera and after offering salutations to the *Gurav*; my father sought a remedy for my bizarre heart ailment. The *Gurav* was probably aware of a Christian graveyard to the east of our

¹⁰ Fondly known as Dada Vaidya, he was one of Goa's foremost social activists, Ayurvedic practitioner and founder-patron of Atmed College, Ponda

¹¹ One of the magazines founded by Dada Vaidya

house. He vaguely concluded that I had been cursed by the ghosts of that graveyard on some fateful night. I could not recollect any incident to that effect but my father seemed more than convinced. I was given some *Vibhuti* (sacred ash) to be consumed with the temple *Teerth* (Holy water) I did the needful at my father's behest but needless to say that didn't help my cause one bit.

Introduction to Tukaram

Like I was hooked to the *Gudgudi* every night, supposedly to fight my unusual breathing problem, it was my reading habit that offered me great solace during day time. I became a voracious reader within no time but sadly our tiny village didn't have enough books to satiate my snowballing appetite. I was already done with the regular inspirational literature like *Vruddha Chanakya* (The Wise Chanakya)

Just when I wondered about what next, my eyes fell on an abridged biography of *Sant Tukaram* (Saint Tukaram) published by the Induprakash printing press. I recalled my sister reciting a few *abhangas* (poetic sermons in praise of *Vitthal*, believed to be an incarnation of Lord *Vishnu*) mentioned in the biography. I sifted through the pages

out of curiosity and although the *abhangas* didn't make an impression at that age, I was mesmerised by Tukaram's awe-inspiring life story cited in the prologue. I read it several times over and even memorised a few *abhangas*. To top it all, this riveting endeavour relieved me of my deep-seated breathing problem.

If my modest means dejected me, Tukaram was seeped in abject poverty. If I felt pathetic about my illiteracy, what Tukaram fetched in the name of education was not even one-tenth of what I had learnt till date. If I grieved over my untimely matrimony, Tukaram had been subjected to not one but two marriages. Despite facing many more hurdles in material life, he had made such phenomenal advancement in spiritual life. In fact, he regarded his day to day strife only as an enabler in the march towards spiritual ascension. 'Then what am I mourning over?' I asked myself. What if I failed in accumulating knowledge and riches, wouldn't I manage to emulate Tukaram's virtues with commensurate effort? I was now filled with newfound hope: that the armour of detachment and the ammunition of devoutness will, slowly but surely, help me conquer the *Shadripus* (six evils of the material world viz. Lust, Greed, Anger, Arrogance, Attachment and Covetousness.) Far from the lure of name

and fame, I now craved after Tukaram's purity. I often sat in complete solitude striving to fortify my thoughts through deep contemplation. As a direct consequence, my chronic heart malaise vanished without a trace.

Bhiku Pundalik Naik was one of our close relations. His father was my father's maternal uncle; and his sister my paternal aunt. His love for me went beyond mere family kinship. I was mightily impressed with his thoughts and often stayed at his residence in Madgaon. Few flippant folks even called me his tail. It was in his company that I clearly comprehended the detrimental effects of alcoholism, child marriage and caste discrimination on an individual as well as on the nation. Thanks to him, I developed new acquaintances in Madgaon who happily lent me several books to read. I would bring home as many books I could and duly returned them after I was done. This course continued for many years. On the flip side, Bhiku Naik's company worsened my *Gudgudi* habit and introduced me to a new routine: a staple noon fare of *Pej* (rice kanji) followed by siesta.

Sonba Mangesh Mulgaonkar was the son of my paternal cousin. Only the relation was distant, not the affinity. He was three years younger to me. His talent was evident right from

his schooling days in Madgaon. He wrote excellent Marathi verse. In January 1895, he opened a small provision store near our place. Far from his liking, this enterprise was more of a compulsion. We had similar likes and dislikes and relished spending time in fruitful conversation.

My elder brother¹² moved to my aunt's place at Kholgad in Kankon province in 1892. My aunt had lost her only son and there was nobody to look after her property. Hence my brother was entrusted the charge of supervising the fields and plantations on her behalf. Back home, the responsibility of running the house fell on my shoulders. Several hurdles came my way but I carried on with grit and gumption. Tukaram's example and other literature inspired me to take the plunge. Life was now stable and it seemed the vicious vulnerabilities of youthful prime were finally behind me.



¹² Ramchandra Kosambi, expired in 1933

3. CIRCUMSTANCES

Shri Bhiku Pundalik Naik once told me, “Had you been born in Europe, your sharp intellect would have reaped rich dividends. But here it is destined to go waste. You are likely to spend all your life warding off monkeys.” I had no reason to counter his prophecy for I too felt I wouldn’t be able to do anything of significance in my life. If I could somehow fulfil my family responsibilities, even that would be some achievement I reckoned. Not that I never thought of social reform, religious upliftment or other means of achieving national interest. But my aspirations, like the impotent wrath of a weak man, remained at best a figment of my imagination. Even if I were to narrow my vision to the social issues of my province alone, the environment was not conducive for bringing about any positive change. For instance I strongly felt that the huge monies that my Hindu brothers spent on the *Shimga* (a festive ritual of Gomantak) be diverted towards building a public school. But who cared? Not only did the *Shimga* continue in full steam, it underwent a reform in the wrong direction: where only one group of courtesans performed at the festival before, they now had two groups in action.

The *Shimga* of Jambawali

Non-Goan readers would have little idea about the history and denotation of the *Shimga* festival. Here's a brief elucidation for their benefit. Damodar, the village deity of Madgaon, was earlier worshipped at the temple site in Madgaon itself. Following the Portuguese invasion of Goa and its diktat of converting non-Christians to Catholicism, the native villagers of Madgaon reinstated the deity's temple to Jambawali, a small village located in a province ruled by the Samvadekar dynasty. Prime among the festivals in honour of the Damodar deity is the *Shimga* for which Madgaon's Saraswat Brahmins and *Vanis* (a caste comprising merchants and traders) formed a huge corpus every year through individual donations. Besides, a small duty was unanimously levied on all Madgaon imports for the purpose. The annual revenue collected by way of this duty was to the tune of 700 to 800 rupees in the year 1897. (I am not aware of the current year's figure) Hefty donations poured into the corpus which was disbursed for multiple purposes - free food for a

week, courtesan performances, pandals, lighting and other allied expenses – for which huge contracts were awarded every year. Youngsters participated in stage plays at night and entertained the crowds with their clownish antics during daytime. The courtesans danced in the evenings till 8 to 9 pm throughout the festive period.

There are enough people in our province to this day who sincerely believe that *Shimga* is a pious service to God. In reality, this festive extravagance has only corrupted the minds of our youth. People flock in huge numbers from all over Gomantak for the *shimga* but the *Agrashalas* (religious rest houses) in the vicinity of the Damodar temple can't accommodate more than 500 to 700 people. In fact, one *Agrashala* is reserved only to serve food. Consequently many pilgrims have to seek shelter in the homes of the performing courtesans. Even a man of good character could succumb to temptation in such vulnerable situations. What to talk of our dumb-witted blokes who find fulfilment in wearing makeup and dancing on stage.

Though my father kept away from plays and tamashas, he believed *Shimga* was a religious festival and hence should continue unhindered. He donated a rupee each year for this festival and travelled to Jambawali to perform *Abhishek*

(a ritual of bathing deities in holy water) and offer *Dakshina* (donation to priests) Owing to his ill health, this task was once entrusted to me in 1893 or 1894. I had to spend the night at a courtesan's place as no other arrangement could be made. I was shocked at the bizarre conduct of few youngsters that night. The owner of the house, an elderly courtesan, in fact urged me to join the party. It wouldn't be prudent to reproduce her unparliamentary words here. Perhaps she assumed it was her right to enlighten a naive young man on worldly matters. I never attended the *shimga* after that ghastly experience and even stopped the one rupee donation.

In the last ten years, theatre has become nothing short of an obsession for the Gomantak people. Worse, there's cut throat competition in this regard. If the people of Mhapsa stage one play, the people of Panaji would retort with two. A theatrical performance is a foregone conclusion, be it *Shimga*, *Ram Navami*, *Hanuman Jayanti* or *Jatra* (a musical theatre form)

This theatrical craze has cause immense harm to our younger generation in particular. Many youngsters work hard throughout the year to save money for buying the play costumes. Several lads have taken to alcohol in the earnest

hope of conquering their stage fright. Our earlier generations abstained from alcohol with staunch discipline. My father took a bath lest even a drop of alcohol fell on him but today we have countless devotees of *Suradevi* (Goddess of liquor) amongst us. Send a whole battalion of anti-alcohol campaigners if you will, they won't budge an inch.

Voice what you see, Do what you can

It was pointless to harbour any hopes of steering any social and religious reform in this depressing environment. Yet I adopted the policy of 'Voice what you see, do what you can' I was a big proponent of the Swadeshi movement. But we had no access to Swadeshi clothes of good quality in Goa. My unconventional ways including my rough Swadeshi attire probably made me a laughing stock in the community. Hearteningly though, I had a few admirers among my young friends, what if I could count them on the fingers of one hand. Of them, Shri Vishnu Rangaji Sheldekar¹³ and Shri Shridhar Prabhu Mhabre¹⁴ are still in touch with me. While I knew Vishnupant since many years, my acquaintance with Shridharpant was relatively recent. But thanks to our friendship, I developed a

keen interest in the work of great Marathi poets like Vaman and Moropant. It was not that we agreed on all issues of social and religious significance but our differences never came in the way of our relationship. His company was also the sole means for me to achieve self-actualization. Household snags though posed hurdles off and on.

I had no affinity for bureaucratic work but I was forced to bear with it. My love for Sanskrit was intact but there were no books or tutors around, nor could I leave home for a long span to pursue my study. I got hold of a copy of the Marathi translation of Bhandarkar's Sanskrit works and memorised 25 to 30 *shLokas* (Vedic verse form integral to Indian epics) from *Raghu's* (Raghuvansh by Kalidasa) second *sarga* (canto). How much Sanskrit knowledge could this miniscule reading amass though? But my Marathi reading continued unabated. Agarkar's Essays, Moropant's *Bharat*, Dyaneshwari, Marathi newspapers, magazines, periodicals, novels, even ad copies of Murray and Lanman toiletries, I read whatever I could lay my hands on. This was my sole means of self-development amidst some trying circumstances.



¹³ Poet and author of religious works including 'History of Shantadurga Sansthan'

¹⁴ Noted writer in Portuguese, regular contributor to Dada Vaidya's magazine LUZ DO ORIENTE

4. AWAY FROM HOME

In 1894 I once travelled all the way to Kolhapur in a desperate quest to learn Sanskrit. I stayed in the vicinity of the Mahalaxmi temple where I was much helped by a couple of student inmates of the place, all Kokanastha Brahmins. They even arranged for my food at a *Khanaval* (a mess serving set meals). I remember having asked them, “How do you source your food every day?” to which one of them replied, “Don’t ask! If we are lucky enough, we get our share of the *Naiveidya* (Prasad or the food offering made to God) else we survive on “*Om Bhavati, Om Bhavati*”. Sensing my puzzled expression, he elaborated that *Om Bhavati*; short for *Om Bhavati Biskhan Dehi* (O Mother, I beg for some food) was the watchword for Hindu Brahmins while begging for alms. Hence the symbolic usage to imply the full expression.

It dawned on me now why the priest asked me to recite the phrase when he handed me a begging bowl in the course of my *Munj* (Thread ceremony). Even so, I lacked the courage to survive on *Om Bhavati, Om Bhavati* like my student friends. I also yearned to meet my ageing father. Hence I got back

to Madgaon before exhausting the money I had on me. My father too had come to Madgaon looking for me, not having heard from me for several days. I instantly fell at his feet and asked for his forgiveness. He admonished me with a stern warning, “If you leave home again in this fashion, I would have to follow suit. Spare a thought for me before you make up your mind again.” I felt miserable and vowed not to repeat the folly ever again.

Adversity

1896 was a year of weak monsoon throughout India. Goa was no exception. An acute shortage of millet and other grains made life miserable for the poor and needy. In comparison, we were better off. In the succeeding year, however, the advent of monsoon brought an epidemic of *Aamansh* (Dysentery) which affected one and all. That August all members of my family, barring a few, were down with the ailment. I was spared myself but had to face a torrid time attending to the ailing patients at home, one after another.

My sister in law was the worst affected. She turned extremely frail and finally succumbed to her illness in October 1986. Till that point I had a very stoic and philosophical approach towards death. I believed it to be an inevitable phenomenon not worthy of bereavement. But having witnessed it from close quarters I lost my composure, especially at the heart-rending sight of her little children wailing and weeping incessantly. The truth of the Sanskrit proverb '*Other man's sorrow is easy to swallow*' dawned on me like never before.

Little did I know that this tragedy was only the start of a litany of disasters that waited in the wings?

Sonba Mangesh Mulgaonkar's uncle Sadashivrao Mulgaonkar lived at Mumbai's Lohar Chawl. He had a job which fetched him about 100 - 125 rupees per month. All this while he hardly enquired about his nephew but in 1896, en route a visit to the family deity Mangeshi, he offered to take Sonba to Mumbai. Sonba's mother was reluctant but I advised him to accompany his uncle for the sake of better prospects. There he made good progress in academics and completed three standards of English medium in one year. Thanks to his innocent ways, he endeared himself to his uncle and aunt who loved him like their own son. In 1896, when

Mumbai suffered the first plague epidemic, Sonba and his cousin stayed at our home in Goa for about six months. In 1897, plague resurfaced in Mumbai. Sonba's uncle had a spare room at Matunga but could not relocate there owing to his poor health. When plague spread across Lohar Chawl, the family moved to Girgaum where, first, the family servant died of plague after which it was Sonba's turn. He died within 24 hours of having contracted the dreaded disease, on March 15, 1898. I remember my brother in law Dr. Sakharam Lad¹⁵ coming to our place from Panaji to convey the sad news. I could not believe my ears. Just then the postman delivered a letter from Mumbai. The handwriting was not Sonba's, it was his cousin's. I can't put in words my heart-wrenching grief on reading the contents. I went without food for several days thereafter, dazed and depressed in bereavement.

Where they came from, where they went to, pray do you know

Who do you grieve for, and, what do you seek

Mourning would make sense if it helped but what does it bestow

Save for leaving the griever whitish and weak

Sallasutta, Pali

¹⁵ Belonged to the historic lineage of Lakhbadada Lad, first Hindu to earn a medical degree from Portugal for which he was disowned by his community. A noble soul who helped the poor and needy

Wish some doctor had administered a dose of this priceless *Buddha Upadesh* (Buddha counsel) on me way back then. As mentioned in the sermon, I turned weak and pale with grief and contracted dyspepsia for life. To make matters worse, our financial condition was not stable during this period. On the one hand, I was overburdened with the ever-mounting family debt and on the other; I was well and truly shaken by the untimely demise of my dear friend. It seemed impossible now to stay in Goa any longer. On May 30, 1898, after jotting down all financial dues on paper, I set off to Gokarna with two rupees in my pocket. But having found no means of livelihood in an unknown place, I returned home on June 16. Despite the homecoming, my confusion remained. Once I spent the entire day in a deep forest and later locked myself in my room. News of my alleged insanity spread throughout the village but the rumours hardly bothered me.

Loan repayment

One of our relatives Shri Vishnu Ramchandra Naik came home from Madgaon to enquire about my wellbeing. He presumed the financial crisis had left me high and dry while, in reality, the root cause of my disillusionment was something else. After sharing a few words of counsel, he assured me

of finding a way out of the debt crisis. On his advice, it was decided to pay off the entire debt through two sources: one, by mortgaging the plots of land owned by my father and two, through the proceeds to be given by Shri Bhiku Pundalik Naik. When we went to Madgaon to his place with the plea, Bhiku Naik blatantly refused to pay any money. Ultimately, Shri Vishnu Naik himself squared off all our dues and made me completely debt-free in March 1912. He came to my rescue when it mattered most for which I would remain indebted to him for life.

On August 28, 1898, my father passed away all of a sudden from a paralytic attack while I was away at Madgaon. This tragedy weakened me further and my mind now wandered away from household matters. My faith in Lord *Buddha* was rising by the day, having already read his biography in an 1897 issue of the *Balbodh*¹⁶ magazine. Now I felt he was all that mattered to me. Earlier I used to discuss his life and work with my friends, now I spoke to myself. I read the biography several times over and often meditated by focusing on *Buddha's* image in my mind's eye. Whatever life I was blessed with, I decided to spend it in the pursuit of learning more about *Buddha* and his philosophy. I was

¹⁶ Children's magazine founded by Vinayak Konddev Oak

absolutely sure, come what may, this knowledge alone will help me attain fulfilment.

In November or December 1898, I happened to read about a new school opened in Cochin by few members of the Saraswat community in an issue of the Keral Kokil¹⁷ magazine. I decided to learn English at that school to gain more insights into Buddhism. Accordingly I travelled by ship to Mangalore on January 31, 1899 but returned home within fifteen days.

When my brother-in-law Dr. Sakharam Lad returned from Portugal on March 12, 1899, he stayed with us at our home for about three months. Later he settled at Mhapsa where he set up his medical practice. My eldest daughter was born at his Chikli home on October 26, 1899. On the occasion of her *Shashti Pujan* (ceremony to mark the sixth day after birth), I had food alongside Dr. Lad with four other gentleman. Just at that time, his neighbours brought a prohibition order against us signed by a religious head demanding *Prayaschitt* (atonement). While two or three gentlemen underwent the *Prayaschitt*, myself and Dr. Kashinath Lad refused to follow suit which invited the wrath of my relatives.

¹⁷ A popular magazine founded by K N Aathlye in Cochin

Abandoning the thought of any further voyages to the south of India, I now decided to move northward in my quest for knowledge. I was particularly upbeat about going to Pune, the city being the cultural epicentre of Maharashtra. My friend Shri Vishnu Rangaji Sheldekar promised to put in a good word for me to one Anant R. Redkar, head clerk at a branch office of the Southern Maratha Railway, Pune. In fact, he had earlier written a letter to him with my introduction but there had been no reply for Redkar's end. Here I was in a hurry to leave Goa and so I decided to meet him at Pune without waiting for his reply. I reached Madgaon in the last week of November 1899 en route my journey to Pune. My relative Shri Bhiku Naik gave me ten rupees for the tour while Shri Vishnu Naik handed over 15 rupees. But Bhiku Naik refused to let me stay at his place. I offered to do menial work like spreading cow dung and was also ready to have food in isolation but he didn't change his mind. Probably he feared exclusion from the community if he gave me shelter.

As per the original plan, Shri Vishnupant Sheldekar was to meet me at Madgaon with the letter but at the last moment he decided to send his brother on his behalf. This meant a wait of three days at Madgaon. Owing to Bhiku Naik's stern denial, I had to stay at my sister's place at Banawali. As

soon as I got the letter on December 1, I decided to leave for Pune the very next day. In those days, the train would leave from Madgaon station at 6 - 6.30 Madras time. Hence it was impossible to reach Madgaon station in time if I were to leave from Banawali. I begged Bhiku Naik to at least let me have food at his place on the night before but even this request was dismissed. Finally I ate at some *KhanavaL* in Madgaon and spent the night outdoors. Finally the next day, December 2, my train left Madgaon station. A copper vessel from Shri Vishnu Naik and one cotton carpet was all I had on my person.



5. DIARY AND NOTES

First fasten the hook firmly in place and then do all else on its support - Tukaram

From June 23, 1895 onwards, I wrote a diary in an old notebook which also had few of my notes covering the events for the year 1898-99. When I returned home after seven long years, I found this notebook tucked among my old papers. This diary is now proving very useful in recalling past events. I am not aware how and where I lost the diary for the year 1896.

While I was in Pune, I wrote my diary in a separate notebook which I entrusted in sealed form to the Secretary of Calcutta's Mahabodhi Sabha in 1904. Subsequently, the entire stock of Mahabodhi books and periodicals were dispatched to *Sarnath* near Kashi. There many books were damaged by termites while others were misplaced. Even my notebook went missing in the process. I tried my best to track it down but all efforts proved in vain. If I had the notebook with me, writing my memoir would have proved much easier.

I don't mean to cause strain to my readers by citing trivial details or long passages from my old notebook. All the same, readers who are not known to me personally must have some idea about the direction of my thoughts before I left home for Pune. Many presumed I left home in sheer frustration and found my way through sheer destiny. Many others felt that my social and religious beliefs underwent a change the moment I left Goa. Hence I reproduce a few passages from the notebook to dispel these and other misconceptions.

A dialogue with Children (originally addressed to my nephews)

Sankhval, May 22, 1898, Sunday

Dear children, I intend to leave a few thoughts and beliefs behind for your benefit. I don't have wealth or riches to offer, I am only sharing my limited experience of this world by way of these notes. I hope you will make good use of them. If this notebook survives the test of time, you may be able to

access it in your adulthood. I urge you to read my notes and other literature that could help you in future to counter the multifarious challenges of day-to-day life.

My dear friends, even if you may not have been blessed with good parents or guardians, try to be good parents to your children. If your guardians have not taught you any appropriate skill, try to develop it on the strength of your aptitude. I sincerely wish you become a role model for your children and friends through righteous behaviour and also serve the cause of poor and ignorant people to the extent possible. As of today, we don't find a single good parent or guardian in our Hindu community of Goa. Most probably, even you would not find one. You could be moved from school to school for the sake of your education but that won't condone the lack of good guardianship that you essentially deserve. I tell this from my own experience. In the absence of the cocoon of responsible parenting, you could fall prey to bad habits and immoral practices which may stick for life, like a stone wedged in the sole of a shoe. Let's discuss some of these potential pitfalls one by one.

First and foremost, the ignorance of your guardians could deprive you of a good teacher leaving you ignorant as well.

Believe me, there's nothing more dangerous than lack of knowledge.

Secondly, if natural affinity is not considered while planning your skill development, the outcome would only be chaotic. I repeatedly told my father about my keen desire to learn Sanskrit but he never took me seriously. I had to pay a heavy price in consequence.

The third evil is bad company. If your parents are not vigilant enough about the company you keep, you could suffer disastrous consequences. You may succumb to sexual temptations or fall prey to a bad habit like the *Gudgudi* which will invariably stick for life. The fourth pitfall is child marriage. If your parents are illiterate but financially well off, they will most likely get you married at a young age. After marriage, your in-laws will put you on a pedestal and the gratuitous respect could make you high-handed and pretentious.

My dear children, if any of these disasters were to strike you, the after-effects will leave you visibly dazed and drained. And god forbid if you enter into wedlock at a very young age, your wife and children would stand to suffer as well. Now let's see how we can counter or mitigate the ill effects

of these evils. Children, you will feel miserable if you would have to remain illiterate in your adulthood. Even if you may occasionally feel like taking to books at that age, lack of will could stop you from making the commensurate effort. History is replete with instances of people who began their tryst with education in their youthful prime but gave it up midway. Why should this happen? Some people are of the opinion that childhood is the sole appropriate time for education. This is true to some extent but that doesn't mean it's impossible to take on learning in adulthood. The prime reason for inaction in this context is the social embarrassment that makes one ask questions like, 'I am an adult now. What could I possibly learn at this age?' Nothing can be farther from the truth. It's extremely important to worship the God of Learning with complete devotion. As you may be aware, no God ever blesses us without devotion. Secondly you would have to banish any sense of shame or embarrassment for good. Feeling ignoble about truthful and righteous matters is unpardonable and worse, it's the trigger of consequential sorrow and disappointment. Think of shame only in the context of immoral and evil deeds. In other words, be shameful about shameful deeds alone.

The only limit to the quest for learning is death. Try to gain as

much knowledge you can till your last breath. Those who give up the spirit of learning in the assumption of having achieved eternal greatness commit nothing short of suicide. Continue your tryst with education without ever being complacent. As mentioned earlier, if you try and learn a skill without considering your natural affinity and aptitude, you are bound to suffer. For example, if you love tailoring but your father happens to be a farmer, he will, in all likelihood, make you plough fields with complete disregard to your natural affinity. In this event, you will learn neither skill in the truest sense.

The only way to escape this trap is to be vocal about your interest in life the moment you become aware of it yourself, irrespective of what the world thinks of it. Convert your natural affinity and aptitude into a pre-occupation and practice it to the extent possible. This effort will undoubtedly help shape a bright and secure future for you. My dear friends, rather than becoming thick skinned brokers and middlemen or amassing great wealth by bribing government officials, it's more dignified and rewarding to earn money based on one's skill, like a cobbler does by making shoes. Consider yourself blessed if you know a skill that could earn you a livelihood. The true Samaritans of our country are the hard working artisans and farmers, not the 'yes-men' of employment who

earn their money only by perpetually pleasing their superiors. Remember wealth doesn't count in the final analysis, only your skill does. Follow your heart and become proficient in your vocation.

Now let's turn to the third evil of bad company. If you find your friends are likely to push you towards bad habits, leave their company with immediate effect even if they may be superior to you in terms of wealth and position. Condemn their bad behaviour in explicit terms such that they will themselves keep away from you. Who knows your admonishment could even motivate them to change for the better. In case you find yourself in their midst in unforeseen circumstances, don't ever succumb to their immoral propositions of consuming liquor or indulging in other harmful practices. The strength of your conscience will be put to test in such vulnerable situations. Even if your opponents may be in majority, don't hesitate to call spade a spade. They may abuse you for your candour, let them do so. Believe me, this forthright approach is the only way to escape the negative influence of bad company.

If you are a victim of child marriage, the only way to salvage some happiness in your adult years is to educate your wife by encouraging her to read books and biographies on morality

and good behaviour. Be just and ethical in your conduct for she'll only follow your example. If you are lucky enough to escape the curse of child marriage, most probably owing to the poor financial condition of your parents, get married in your adult years only if and when you are free of the first three devils. Better remain a spinster for life than marry a twelve year old girl at age twenty five.

Dear children, what you would need to do for your own children need not be told any differently. 'How's an ideal married life like?' My answer to this question is: like our feathered friends, the birds. Like us, birds live in a society but in their homes, you would find only the immediate family of husband, wife and kids alone. This is so unlike our homes that seem to accommodate just about everyone – brothers, cousins, and their wives and kids. The hugely detrimental arrangement of joint families has been in vogue among Hindu households since time immemorial; the earlier it is terminated, the better. The feathered males and females are adept managing their households and most lovingly raise their little ones. They even teach their kids how to build homes and feed their stomachs. But beyond that, they don't worry about the future of their children. Dear kids, isn't this tradition wonderful? Aren't the birds more competent householders

than humans? Then why do we proclaim ourselves to be the most superior species among all living beings?

My little friends, there's a lot to share with you but there's not enough time at hand, not even to proofread this text. Please correct it yourself before you read it. One last point which was inadvertently missed out earlier: take good care of your parents in their old age.

August 14, 1899

My beliefs

Opinions change with circumstances and I am no exception to this rule. Here I cite my original thoughts such that keen observers will be able to discern the gradual changes in my outlook with the passage of time.

On Religion

Religion influences a man like nothing else does, not even polity. A foreign ruler may invade your state but would still fail to conquer your religion. Even in the case of forcible conversion to another religion, it would take ages to wipe out the deep-seated remnants of the original faith from the

believer's value system.

On Society

We must put an end to caste discrimination and child marriage with immediate effect. With the cessation of child marriage, there would be no need to formalize remarriage. Having said that, it's immoral to pose hurdles in the way of remarriage. We should emulate the birds in family and household matters. Parents should help their grown up kids to become independent in every respect. This will weed out the needless strife that invariably erupts in joint families causing immense suffering.

On Governance

The best system of governance is a democracy; the next in line are sovereign monarchy followed by native dominion. The worst form is what is prevalent in India today. We all should strive to take our state's leadership towards the best form of governance.

On Individual responsibility

Till we are tender and ignorant, we should faithfully obey our parents. Even later, we should always treat them with respect and never hurt their sentiments. If any tradition is rooted in

superstition, we should renounce it without hesitation. We should run our enterprise without causing trouble to others. Never remain inactive in life. There's nothing more sinful than inaction. Never become debtors, a debtor can never come up in life. Liquor and other inebriations are the root cause of a person's downfall. Undertake any initiative of benevolence – whether religious or political – a degree lower than what you are capable of such that you won't fail in the endeavour. Follow the teachings of Lord *Buddha* and mull over his thoughts. If you are unable to comprehend them, seek the help of a learned devotee.

These passages give a fair idea of the direction in which my thoughts flowed before I left home for Pune. I could clearly comprehend my objective in life but didn't know the way to attain it. How and when I found it will be suitably expounded in the succeeding chapters. As of now, I take leave of my readers.



6. STOPOVER AT PUNYA PATTAN (PUNE)

*Friction with the righteous is way better than
friendliness with the malicious*

The moment I left Madgaon, dark clouds of anxiety engulfed my mind and even the scenic landscape of Dudhsagar could not dispel my gloom. As my train chugged ahead at a leisurely pace, the majestic mountains and the countryside beneath them filled my gaze. But even they seemed to mirror my melancholy. I whispered in my mind, “O motherland! I am your little child, discarded and disclaimed by most of my friends and relatives. But I know you’ll never disown me, I’ll always find shelter in some or the other corner of your vast hinterland. Yet, do I have any moral right to expect anything from you? Time and again, I have left your shores in the pursuit of progress only to return in vain. But now I have resolved never to return even if I fail in my mission. O Mother! I love you dearly and I am sure, befitting your name of *Sarvasaha* (all-enduring), you’ll pardon my sins without reserve. Even so, do something such that I am unable to return in the event of my failure. Let not

my resolve waver at any cost.”

My train entered Pune railway station on December 3, 1899 at 4 am. I hired a *Tonga* (horse cart) to reach Rasta Peth. After much effort, I finally located Shri Anant Ramakrishna Redkar’s house. He extended me a warm welcome and, after a couple of days, took me to his neighbour Shri Narayanrao Varde. Having learnt I was from Goa, Narayanrao asked Redkar sarcastically, “Why have you brought this *Pej-addict* Gomantak here? Pune has no use for him.” He then turned to me and said, “Please don’t mind my quip. It was meant as a joke.” I replied, “I have no reason to feel offended. Jivbadada Bakshi, Lakhbadada Lad and many others were *Pej* drinkers too. You have probably forgotten these gentlemen in the company of Puneites and hence have lost interest in *Pej* too.” This answer silenced him for good. Later whenever I went to his place, I deliberately left a message with his children “The *Pej-savouring* Gomantak babu is at the door” which they parroted to him verbatim. He begged of me one day, “Please stop reminding me of those words

again. Every time you do that, I feel as if you seek revenge. If I have hurt your sentiment by calling you a *Pej-drinker*, I duly apologise.”

First meeting with Dr. Bhandarkar

My prime reason to come to Pune was to find a clerical job during the day time for the sake of subsistence such that I could learn Sanskrit from the *Shastris* (Sanskrit teachers) in my spare time. I told Mr. Redkar of my purpose and he ran from pillar to post to help me out but all his efforts went in vain. I myself went to offices like that of Sudharak¹⁸ but could not find any opening. As I wondered about the options before me, Redkar made an earnest suggestion, “I have many friends in the police department and I can recommend your name for a suitable job there.” I didn’t have a high opinion of the police. Hence I replied, “I would rather starve than serve in the police department.” I was sure my Sanskrit learning would go for a toss if I joined the police.

I came to know in the next few days that Dr. Bhandarkar¹⁹

¹⁸ Newspaper founded by Maharashtra’s leading social activist and intellectual Gopal Ganesh Agarkar

¹⁹ Dr. Sir Ramakrishna Gopal Bhandarkar was 62 at that time, he settled in Pune in 1893 after a glorious stint of 30 years as an educationist. Noted Sanskrit scholar and internationally renowned Indologist

had long settled in Pune. One afternoon, I went to his bungalow with an introductory note. I don’t remember the contents of the letter except that it was a brief narration of how I had come to Pune all the way from Goa in the pursuit of Sanskrit learning and hence wished to meet him. At the very end, I had cited the 5th *Ovi* (verse) from *Dyaneshwari’s* 9th chapter:

O Almighty, you are the reservoir of blissful nectar, the source of cool serenity that we are after. If we dread to show affinity here, where else would we find peace of mind?

Dr. Bhandarkar called me in immediately after reading the letter. He asked me, “You are from Goa, you say. How come you write chaste Marathi?” I replied, ‘You’ll find several like me in Goa.’ I then briefed him about *Pathyabodh* and other newspapers. Visibly impressed by what he heard, he told me, “I presumed Goa to be an under-developed province. But it seems it has many young and promising lads in its midst.”

After listening to my tale, he remarked, “It would take you seven years to become proficient in Sanskrit, i.e. to become a *Pandit*. If you don’t need to send any money back home,

I could help you in sponsoring your education. You need not take up a job for that since your employment would only hamper your learning. I can arrange for a monthly allowance of one or two rupees and you can easily get five to six rupees a month from the Saraswat Brahmins here in Pune."

Saying so, he took my leave asking me to meet him again sometime soon. This encouraging conversation lifted my spirits and I headed back in the direction of Shri Redkar's house in a happy mood.

With our growing interaction, Dr. Bhandarkar soon developed a liking for me. He directed me to the Sanskrit school of *Nagarkar Wada* with a recommendation letter and a personal copy of *Kaumudi* (*Siddhant Kaumudi*, an insightful critique of Panini's *Sutras*). The head master of the school Vasudev Shastri Abhyankar assigned me to the tutelage of Mahadev Shastri Joshi. I began the study of *Kaumudi* under his guidance but even after three months, I could not grasp its meaning. I didn't lose hope though. On the brighter side, I could now comprehend *Raghuvansh* to some extent.

Redkar had arranged for my daily food in one *Khanaval* of Budhwar Peth. The mess owner seemed a cranky fellow,

probably having learnt that I was a Saraswat. But my assurance of paying 4-8 annas over and above the normal fare made him think better and he was cordial to me in a flash. For about two weeks, I had food at this *Khanaval* and stayed at Shri Redkar's place. But this arrangement was far from convenient as the Sanskrit school was far off from both venues. Subsequently Dr. Bhandarkar arranged for my accommodation in the vicinity of the Prarthana Samaj which solved the problem of the long commute. It also helped me make more acquaintances in Pune. Prime among them was Shri Madhavrao Lotlikar who often took me home for lunch. There I once happened to meet Shri Kashinath Raghunath Mitra who had come to Pune for vacation. We would often meet for morning walks and during one such interaction, the subject of *Buddha* cropped up. He asked me to read Govind Narayan Kane's²⁰ book titled Jagatguru Gautam Buddhache Charitra (Biography of Gautam *Buddha*) and later secured a copy for me.

The book was a translation of Edwin Arnold's *Light of Asia*, a poetic work which was not known to be cent percent authentic. But it's been written with such heartfelt devotion that readers can't escape its spellbinding effect. No wonder,

²⁰ Biographer of Hazrat Mohammad Paigambar and Lord Bacon. He converted to Christianity later in life

over 500 reprints of the book were published in countries like England and America. Kane's translation is not as lucid as the original but I was so impressed with it at that time that I read several passages over and over again. This translation seemed to me like an original work in itself. I still remember how some of the text invariably brought a lump to my throat and my eyes were filled with tears of joy within no time. I immersed myself in this book whenever I felt sad or forlorn.

Having exhausted all money on food and clothing, I was now unsure about further sustenance. Dr. Bhandarkar had promised help but that didn't seem forthcoming. I decided to ask him upfront but unfortunately he fell ill just at that time. I now hesitated to open the topic but on one occasion I somehow managed to convey my anxiety on some pretext. Later I met him on February 25, 1900 at his place for lunch. (Even earlier, he regularly invited me home but I seldom went to his place since his bungalow was on the outskirts of the city. Once or twice, I stayed overnight at his place like I did on February 25.) The next morning, when I brought up the topic of my sustenance, he replied, "I can help you financially only if you become a member of Prarthana Samaj. Other than the institutional support, there's little else I can do for you."

I had all along told Dr. Bhandarkar about my interest in Buddhism, right from the moment I first met him. Even so, I heard him tell his elder brother (Prof. Shridharpant Bhandarkar) with obvious sarcasm en route a car journey we had together, "He wants to become Lord *Buddha*." I replied, "How can I dream of becoming Lord *Buddha* or even his disciple. I am not even worthy enough to become your disciple."

This conversation misled both of us in different ways. I presumed he would now help me in my study of Buddhism while he thought I was now ready for the Prarthana Samaj membership. What I had actually meant was that it was difficult to become a Buddhist in the present circumstances; hence I would consider myself blessed if I could gain some knowledge of Sanskrit worthy enough to be rated among Dr. Bhandarkar's disciples. My submission had no connection with Prarthana Samaj whatsoever. Whatever I may have implied, the fact was that he misinterpreted me.

He said, "Till now, I presumed you would take our membership sooner or later and do your bit to promote our cause." I contended, "I agree with most Prarthana Samaj principles and beliefs. Like you, I am dead against caste discrimination

and child marriage. But I don't wish to become a member of any institution till I have acquired reasonable knowledge of Buddhism. I strongly feel, at least at this moment, that Buddhism alone is the real means of achieving true spiritual progress. “

“How can you say that? What's your knowledge of Buddhism?”

“I have read Jagatguru Gautam Buddhache Charitra and have come to the conclusion that *Buddha's* thoughts and his religion will immensely benefit mankind.”

“Oh! Are you referring to Kane's book? That's only a translation of the English original. The English work doesn't convey even one-fourth of Buddhism's essence and its Marathi translation doesn't bring out one-fourth of what the English book has to offer. And you feel that book has lent you great insights into Buddhism?”

“I admit I lack any knowledge of Buddhism but consider for once that if one-fourth of the original is so captivating, how enthralling would the original be? That's precisely why I wish to study it in more depth.”

“But of what use is Buddhism to our nation? Besides, it's impossible to gain in-depth knowledge of Buddhism in India. You'll have to travel to Nepal or Ceylon for that.”

“I can't vouch on our country's behalf but I would certainly find Buddhism very useful and I would be more than happy to go to Nepal or Ceylon in its pursuit.”

“But you would have to become a *Bikshu* (Buddhist monastic)”

“I am ready to do anything for the study of Buddhism which I believe to be my life work.”

Journey onward

Our conversation continued for long but there was no conclusion. Hard as we tried, we couldn't convince each other of our conflicting logic. I had no doubt in my mind that I would now have to leave Pune. But where could I go? Ceylon or Nepal, I was not sure of either place. The language and customs of Ceylon would be starkly different and I could not speak any south Indian language. Not that Nepal was a particularly feasible option but at least I was confident of

making the commensurate effort to learn the North Indian languages. Besides there were many Maharashtrians to be found in Kashi which meant I would not face any language problems at least till Kashi.

With these considerations, I decided to move northward. I duly returned the copy of *Kaumudi* to Dr. Bhandarkar. Keeping minimal clothes aside, I gave all my garments to the peon of Prarthana Samaj Shri Balwantrao Pawar. I borrowed twelve rupees from Shri Redkar and had two robes dyed yellow (Pitambar or yellow clothing worn by ascetics) through Pawar's help.

Wearing the yellow robes and duly renouncing the *Shikha Sutra* (*Shikha* - tuft of hair on the crown and the *Sutra* - sacred thread worn round the shoulder, both mandatory for Hindu Brahmins), I left Pune at the stroke of midnight on March 1, 1900. Notwithstanding the fact that Pune was not of much help towards my learning endeavour, I immensely benefited from the sojourn in other ways. For one, my acquaintances here helped me pick up the nuances of the Marathi language and lifestyle which in turn made me more confident about my onward voyage. Besides, several sermons pronounced in the course of the Prarthana Samaj prayer meetings made a lasting impression on my mind. During the prayer meeting

held on the first death anniversary of Shri Keshavrao Godbole, ex-secretary of Prarthana Samaj (who had expired long before I came to Pune) Dr. Bhandarkar recited two Tukaram *abhangas* and subsequently elucidated their meanings. That day's counsel is undoubtedly the biggest benefit of my brief stay at Pune. I don't remember the counsel but I cite the two *abhangas* here, my guiding lights in times of inaction emanating from indecision:

One should ever be transfixed on the thought of traversing the deep sea of existence. Our physical form is destined to perish for it is only temporal. One should long for the company of saints and promptly strive to attain spiritual ascension. Says Tuka: one's eyes should not be blinded by smoke in conducting the affairs of the material world.

One must first attain one's own wellbeing in the guiding light of one's acumen without hinging on external support. One should develop the strength of self-belief and not long for others. Says Tuka: dive into the very core of the Brahma desisting all corporal cravings.



7. PUNE TO GWALIOR

As mentioned in the earlier chapter, I left Pune on Amavasya day at 12:00 midnight to board the Dhond-Manmad train from Pune station. My mind was pitch-dark with disappointment. But the occasionally twinkling stars in the clear skies above me did give me a semblance of hope. I was conscious of my perilous initiative as also the faint probability of success on the chosen path. At the same time, I was pretty much hopeful that with extraordinary resolve, I could fetch at least some knowledge of Buddhism in this lifetime. That my adventure was not rooted in any selfish or evil motives was also reassuring to me. If I died without achieving my objective, I would still have the satisfaction of having put in my best foot forward.

After Dhond, few compassionate students in my compartment on their way to Indore took good care of me. I alighted at Indore with them and accompanied them to a *Khanaval* where they had decided to check-in for the night. In the next couple of days, I had almost exhausted all my money. Now further sustenance meant I had to beg for alms. But

who would help me in this unknown region? I tried my luck at a few places but to no avail. After much stress, I was directed to the door of one prominent official of the city of surname Wagle. It was morning time and he was smoking Hookah in his living room dressed in a cotton vest. I was familiar with *Gudgudi* but had never seen a Hookah smoke pipe before. For a second, my eyes were transfixed on its cup-like *chillum* and the serpentine tube which I must say was a very captivating sight. But I quickly recovered from my trance to brief Raosaheb of my purpose. As it is, he was quite busy with his Hookah and a clerk from his office was also at the door. Needless to say, he had little time to attend to my petty request. He quickly ordered another clerk who went in and came out in quick succession to place four annas on my outstretched palm. I don't remember now whether the annas were British coins or Holkar coins but honestly I was quite pleased that Raosaheb helped me without much ado. The quick fix solution had saved me the ordeal of facing the barrage of usual questions like: 'Where do you come from?', 'Where are you headed?', 'What's your caste?', 'Are you

married?’ and the like.

The railway fare for Indore-Ujjaini journey was around seven annas. I bought a ticket adding the four annas from Shri Wagle to the few I still had on me. I reached Ujjaini in the evening. As expected, the task of finding shelter loomed large. Taking me to be a traveller, few people gave me the address of a *Bhikshuk* called Ram Bhatt who supposedly ran a lodge. Finding my way through the maze of narrow by lanes, I somehow reached his place. He was not at home but nobody inside seemed to have any objection when I stepped in bag and baggage. There was no tap water in this town and thanks to the drought that year; river water was scarce too. I could see stagnant water in many a pot hole around but it was filthy and infested with worms. I somehow washed my hands and feet in the river but hesitated to quench my thirst. I asked a few passers-by about the availability of potable water anywhere; but their answer was not in the affirmative. Left with no option, I drank the river water after making a faint attempt to filter it using my robe. The outcome was disastrous. I lost all sleep that night with several rounds to the toilet. The next day, a Dravidian student staying at Ram Bhatt's place, offered to take me along for the day's *Bhiksha*, but I preferred to stay indoors owing to

the stomach upset. The poor fellow visited more homes than usual that day only to collect enough food for both of us. But I simply couldn't eat. On his insistence, I grabbed a morsel or two but the toilet rounds continued unabated. I felt as if I would die of the sheer exhaustion. Finally, I went to the doctor, a gentleman called Joglekar, whose clinic was adjacent to Ram Bhatt's house. Though I felt better with his medicine, the contaminated water had left me high and dry. Joglekar narrated my sad story to one Shri Kelkar, a teacher at Madhav School, who happened to be at the clinic at that time. By sheer coincidence, we bumped into each other that evening and he offered to take me home. I gladly agreed.

At Kelkar's place all arrangements were prim and prime. Most important, they sourced water from the potable well. As a result, I was back to normal in a couple of days. Kelkar introduced me to few professors at his college. All these good men raised donations among themselves and arranged for my ticket to Gwalior and some money for conveyance. I left from Ujjaini and alighted at Jhansi for a two day halt. A Karhade Brahmin *Tonga* driver took me home in his cart. He asked me to pay a few rupees, to a widow who stayed at his place, to arrange for my food. Unfortunately, the colitis contracted at Ujjaini resurfaced to bother me again. Weak

and exhausted, I couldn't even manage to have a good look around Jhansi town.

Around 12 March, I finally reached Gwalior and checked-in at Dr. Lele's place. The next day I proceeded to meet Dr. Dwarkanath Shankar Wagle. Initially he seemed quite cold and aloof. But when he learnt I am a Saraswat Brahmin, he insisted that I stay at his place. But I requested him for an independent accommodation since his home was quite constricted in space and the women of his house were *Purdahnashin* (women observing Purdah - or curtain - in line with the North Indian custom of female seclusion.) He arranged for a room at the back side of a Sardar's bungalow, adjacent to his home. I was here for six months.

Dr. Wagle's medicine cured my colitis. When I was fit and fine, I told him about my purpose of going to Kashi. He was of the opinion that since it was summer time, I should postpone my visit till the weather improves. I had no reason to disagree with him. The Gwalior summer however was no different. One simply couldn't step outdoors during day time. Occasionally extreme hot winds blew throughout the night which made me lose sleep from the acute skin burn. On one such night, I developed high fever which kept me

bed ridden for a couple of days. Fortunately Dr. Wagle got me back to normal again.

By now I was addicted to smoking Beedis. I tried my best to get rid of this bad habit but could not succeed. Beedis were easily available in Gwalior but in Dr. Wagle's company, I began smoking cigarettes. With great effort, I brought down my daily intake to three cigarettes. But I would grow restless if I didn't get my daily quota. Dr. Wagle often advised me to drop this habit but his sermon fell on deaf ears. But now when I fell ill from the summer heat, my mouth temporarily lost all taste for anything including Beedis and cigarettes. I felt this was my best chance to escape the clutches of this deplorable habit. I feared the urge to smoke would overpower my resolve in the coming days but, most hearteningly, it didn't. In the last 12 or 13 years, I did smoke a cigarette or two while in Ceylon and Burma. But my tobacco habit, which I got rid of while in Gwalior, never came back to haunt me again.

My days at Gwalior were largely spent in dining at Dr. Wagle's place and resting in my room. But I hated this inertia and inaction. So I took to reading the collected works of the poet Moropant. I also learnt a few *shLokas* of *Kiratarjunia* with the help of a graduate gentleman, himself a student of Sanskrit,

who was a tutor to Dr. Wagle's nephew. I even approached a *Shastri* from one of Gwalior's colleges and requested him to teach me Sanskrit but he refused my proposition outright. Nevertheless I did whatever I could to make my Gwalior stay as fulfilling as possible.

Self-fulfilment

Every time I broached the topic of Kashi, Dr. Wagle used to look away on some pretext or the other. Finally, he spoke his mind one day, "You are like my younger brother, and I don't approve of your worthless country-wide adventure. You are well versed in Marathi and I can easily help you fetch a job of 25-30 rupees salary. Given your intellect and sincerity, you will surely graduate to a level of 200-250 rupees in the next 5-6 years." He then cited umpteen success stories of Marathi speaking gentlemen from Gwalior. I was rather amused by his discourse, surprised as to how he could fix the range of my market value - 25 rupees to 200 rupees - in only six months of our acquaintance.

I told him without reserve, "I seek self-fulfilment, not salary. I have not left home in search of money." But he was not convinced with my answer. He said, "Your lifestyle and food

habits have made you a weakling. Here, I am with you. Who'll look after you in Kashi? If you are unsure of getting a job right away, I promise to pay you a sum of 30 rupees a month from my salary till you find a suitable job. I can even sign a stamp paper to that effect."

I replied, "I am really indebted to you. You have indeed cared for me like a brother during these six months. But is it not your moral duty to help your younger brother in satiating his thirst for knowledge? Do you want him to die as a mere clerk of the Shinde regime? I admit I can easily fetch a clerical job with your help. But would it be prudent to kill my urge to learn Sanskrit in the process? If you want to help me, do so for my education alone."

He was visibly offended and made one last-ditch attempt to change my mind through the counsel of one of his friends Shri Malap. But I had already made up my mind. Ultimately he approved of the onward Kashi journey with obvious reluctance. Assuring me of financial help towards my education, he also made it clear that his doors would always remain open for me lest my Kashi plan boomeranged for some reason.

A student from Tanjavur, B. Narayanrao, was studying law at

Gwalior during that time. Since he was a regular visitor at Dr. Wagle's place, I knew him well. He was a restless soul but straight forward by nature. We developed a liking for each other in no time. He assured me of paying three rupees per month throughout my Kashi stay and even handed over the first instalment in advance. Dr. Wagle gave me 20 rupees for conveyance while his friend Mr. Malap donated a rupee. Dr. Wagle also lent me his sturdy waistcoat which later helped me counter two chilly winters in Kashi.

It was impossible to retain my Sanyasi appearance in Kashi for I feared that the *Shastris* of Kashi, like the *Shastri* of Gwalior, would also deny me tutelage taking me to be a non-Brahmin. So it was decided, on B. Narayanrao's advice, to put on the sacred thread and become a Brahmin again. But what about the mandatory tuft of hair on the crown? Narayanrao was again to my rescue. He suggested I get down mid-way at Prayag and have my head shaven in such a manner that would leave few strands on the crown.

Narayanrao came to see me off and handed over a few sacred threads before we left for the station. Dr. Wagle had arranged for the horse carriage. Hardly had we left home when the horse lost his composure and refused to move

ahead. Anyone else in my position would have turned back fearing bad omen but not me. Fortunately Narayanrao didn't believe in superstition either. The violent horse was pacified soon after and we reached Gwalior station in good time. Bidding goodbye to B. Narayanrao and two-three other gentlemen, I boarded the train. The day, most probably, was September 14, 1900.



8. DESTINATION KASHI

The next day I reached Prayag (Allahabad), where I checked in at the house of a priest hailing from South India. I found him to be quite a good natured fellow. He agreed to conduct all religious rites in exchange of 1.25 rupees. The main procedure was the *Kshour* (shaving of head). He took me to a barber on the river banks the next day. Thanks to my brief stint at Gwalior, I could speak a little bit of *Hindustani*. I instructed the barber in *Hindustani* to leave a tuft of 4-5 inches diameter on my crown. But something was surely lost in my perfunctory translation because he ended up doing a rather clumsy job that left a tiny tuft of half inch diameter, away from the crown at that. Barring the *Kshour*, I skipped all other rituals like the *Pind* (Hindu ritual of oblation believed to bring salvation to departed souls). Having already received 1.25 rupees from me, the priest took due care of all formalities on my behalf.

On September 20, 1900, I boarded the afternoon train from Prayag and reached Kashi railway station at 10:30 in the night. As soon as I landed on the platform, one Kokanastha Brahmin

named Sakharam Bhat rushed towards me and exclaimed, "Please come to my place, I'll take good care of you." No sooner had he finished his sentence, another Sakharam Bhat, slightly shorter in height and darker in complexion, made a counter offer, "Come with me. Your forefathers had stayed at our place years ago. Why are you entertaining this imposter?" The less said about the duel that ensued between the fairer and darker versions of Sakharam Bhat the better. Trying my best to pacify the two, I remarked, "Why do you fight? Whoever furnishes the written proof in connection with my forefathers, I'll go to his place tomorrow. But tonight, I'll stay put with the fair Sakharam Bhat since I met him first."

As I was leaving the platform with the fair Sakharam Bhat, the dark one yelled at the top of his voice, "Go with him if you like. He'll rob you of your belongings first and then kill you. Beware!" I calmly replied, "I have nothing that one could possibly take away from me. And I don't fear death." That night we slept in a tiny room near the station along with two three other gentlemen but the fear of murder never crossed

my mind. In fact I enjoyed a sound sleep.

The next morning Sakharam Bhat woke me up at dawn and we left for his home in a horse cart. He paid the fare from his own pocket. At his house, there was a woman of presumably lower caste with her children. Apparently he had to look after them. When the lady opened the door, the priest had me settled in one room on the attic. After I had refreshed myself with a quick wash, the priest came to me with a laundry list of religious endeavours including *Panchkroshi* and *Shraddha*. I told him, 'I am in no hurry to perform these rites, I plan to stay here for one or two years so we could perform any ritual anytime I deem fit. Right now, I need to find a Guru and begin my tutelage under him. I also need to make arrangements for my daily food.' When he was sure there was no money to be gained from me, he replied, "Since you are a Shenvi (Saraswat), you could find shelter in the *Mutt* reserved for Shenvis." Actually, there were three Saraswat *Mutts* in Kashi but since the priest was only aware of the one on Durga Ghat, he advised me to go there.

In search of *Anna Chatra* (Meal distribution shelters)

I left for the *Mutt* immediately after lunch. It was drizzling as I walked, making enquiries about Durga Ghat on the way. On

one turn, I bumped into a Brahmin headed towards another *Anna Chatra* supposedly in close vicinity of Durga Ghat who simply asked me to follow him. He took me through a maze of extremely narrow by-lanes (Kashi is full of them) which made me rather suspicious of his intentions. Few places were pitch-dark as if we were passing through a coal mine. Just then I remembered that barring an anna-two anna, all my money lay in my purse at Sakharam Bhat's house. I remembered the proverb '*Dar to piche raha*' (I have left fear lurking behind) I heaved a sigh of relief. Let this man take me anywhere, he won't fetch a thing from me. At last, we reached Durga Ghat. He directed me towards the Shenvi *Mutt* after which we parted ways.

An elderly gentleman named Shri Govindrao Palekar was residing in the Shenvi *Mutt* at this time. I knew that his son Shri Waman Govind Palekar was a renowned advocate from Belgaum. Govindrao had recently returned from a court in Kashi court where he had to complete some paperwork following the untimely demise of his son. Although he made the journey in a palanquin for health reasons, he fell ill from a heavy downpour on his way back. He was down with diarrhoea when I met him at the *Mutt*. Despite his illness, he was very warm and cordial and insisted that I stay with him in

his room. I was already happy to have found my destination through the winding route of maddening by-lanes. To add to my delight, Govindrao's room offered a breath-taking view of the Ganges and the scenic surroundings. The grand spectacle coupled with Govindrao's inspiring words lifted my spirits and I shifted bag and baggage from Sakharam Bhat's place to the *Mutt* that very day.

An elderly widow of Saraswat caste hailing from Cochin was also at the *Mutt*, in charge of the kitchen. The next day, Govindrao arranged for my food out of his own rations although he was fasting himself. Kashibai was most surprised to see my makeshift tuft of hair. I suspect she complained to Govindrao about it. But since Govindrao was well aware of the liberties that modern Brahmins enjoyed in the name of progress, he probably calmed her down with some logic on the following lines. "He is young; he would have emulated others. That doesn't make him a non-Brahmin. Nowadays, many people grow their hair in that fashion. And since he claims to know many Saraswats from Belgaum, he's bound to be a Saraswat himself." But the lady didn't seem to buy his argument. She kept my food plate outside the room and didn't allow me to touch any of her utensils. I thanked my stars that she wasn't suspicious of my sacred thread, brand new that it was!

There was a water tap right next to the Shenvi *Mutt*. But since this water was considered unholy as per Brahminical faith, folks at Govindrao's place touched nothing else but water from the Ganges. Unfortunately I had to suffer the wrath of this holy water on the very first day. I lost all sleep from the umpteen rounds to the toilet that night. The next day onwards, I quietly filled my tumbler with the tap water while no one was around. I had to be extra vigilant about this clandestine affair though. Had Kashibai caught me red-handed any time; I would have been deprived of food at the *Mutt* forever.

With Govindrao's help, I chalked out a plan to make my Kashi stay as fruitful as possible. He advised me to secure a recommendation letter from some influential authority in order to avail of food at the *Anna Chatra*. He also instructed me to begin my Sanskrit learning from *Ved Shastra Sampanna* Gangadharshashtri Telang. Elaborating my Kashi sojourn, spent in the guiding light of Govindrao's instruction, in this chapter itself would needlessly stretch it. Hence I take leave of my readers for now.



9. KASHI PENANCE

There are several *Anna Chatras* in Kashi but only two follow an open door policy. One of them has been established by a few merchants from Madras and the second has been incepted by Shrimant Maharaj Jayajirao Shinde.

When Shrimant Maharaj Jayajirao Shinde visited Kashi, he wished to donate 100 rupees to every Brahmin household of Kashi. But the Pandits of Kashi refuted this proposition. They were opposed to the idea that every Brahmin, whether learned or illiterate, should fetch the same amount. An angry Shrimant Jayajirao then retorted, "If my idea does not meet your approval, I will dump the entire six lakhs earmarked for this purpose into the Ganges!" Few level-headed gentlemen then intervened and advised Shrimant Jayajirao to utilize the said funds to set up an *Anna Chatra* instead. Shrimant Jayajirao conceded to this request and consequently established an *Anna Chatra* in the Peshwa-built Balaji temple after securing its ownership from the British Government. This *Anna Chatra* thus came to be known as

the Balaji *Anna Chatra*.

Saraswats were allowed to dine at the Balaji *Anna Chatra* but only with the approval of senior officials. But even with the approval, they could eat only in the second *Pantki* (batch) after the batch of non-Saraswat Brahmins had been served. I had no option but to dine at this *Anna Chatra*, whichever the batch. Govindrao Palekar asked me to get a recommendation from Gwalior that could be shown to the *Chatra* officials. I wrote to Dr. Wagle in this regard but he asked Shri Malap instead to send a reply on his behalf. Shri Malap suggested I skip the *Balaji Anna Chatra* as Dr. Wagle, he assured me, would soon put in a word and get me admitted to the *Anna Chatra* owned by Raoraje Raghunathrao Rajwade.

Raoraje's father Dinakarrao had set up a small *Anna Chatra* on Bramha Ghat with capacity to feed around 15 Brahmins. Had my arrangement been done at this place, it would have saved me much hassle but Dr. Wagle, being rather sedate

and withdrawn by nature, never spoke to Raoraje about it. He didn't even send a recommendation letter for the *Balaji Anna Chatra*. I was left waiting in vain for his reply.

Sanskrit Learning

It's not really difficult to pursue one's education in Kashi. There are scores of Pandits who offer coaching at no cost whatsoever. But in line with Tukoba's advice '*It's elementary to tie bullocks firmly to the yoke*', I decided to study under the renowned Pandit *Ved Shastra Sampanna Gangadhar Shashtri*. Govindrao was happy with my decision. One afternoon I set about in search of Gangadhar Shashtri's home. As I neared his locality I bumped into Babasaheb, a gentleman of the Sardar clan hailing from Jamkhindi who was in Kashi for about twelve years now. He was a student of Gangadhar Shashtri and was returning home that day after attending a discourse on *Mimansa Shastra*.

I asked him, "Does Gangadhar Shastri live here?"

He questioned, "Why do you wish to know?"

"I wish to study Sanskrit."

"How far have you progressed?"

"I know a couple of Raghu's *Sargas*, nothing beyond that. I wish to begin the study of *Koumudi* now."

Visibly surprised, he remarked, "What's the use of learning Sanskrit at this age? I presume you must be 25 at least. Why bother with *Koumudi* now? Instead, it would be more prudent to seek a job with the railways or some such place. Don't waste your time in this pointless pursuit. Do you know how many years you would take to master this intricate subject?"

"How many years?"

"To study a single *Shastra*, it would take almost 12 years. 12 long years! Are you ready to devote that much time?"

"Sir, 12 years is no big deal, I can stay put for even 20 years if required. But I am determined to complete my Sanskrit education."

Now he was even more surprised. He asked, "What are you saying? 20 years? What benefit would this learning fetch you after 20 years?"

I replied with a smile, “You are a Hindu which means you believe in reincarnation. Am I right?”

“Of course I do! But what’s the connection?”

“The toil of this birth will bear fruit in my next birth, I am sure of that. With all the effort now, won’t I be better prepared then?”

Babasaheb appeared shell shocked. He concluded, “If such is your faith, go ahead. That house over there, that’s Gangadhar Shashtri’s.” Saying so, he took my leave.

Having passed few houses down the street, I noticed a gentleman by a ground-level window of a house. (Kashi homes, like the vintage houses of Pune, have windows etched at ground level) He was relaxing against the support of a cushion which made me certain he was a *Yagnopavit* Brahmin (Yagnopavit is the union of two words: Yagna and Upvitam. ‘Yagna’ means a sacrificial ceremony and ‘Upvitam’ implies sacred thread) Going by his short frame and dark complexion, I presumed he would be from Telangana. But hard as I tried, I could not see the link between his half-washed *Shahapuri* towel and the cushion support. If this priest was poor, how come he enjoyed a cushion for support? On

the other hand, if he was rich, why should the cloth be dirty? Notwithstanding my perplexment, I stepped forward to ask the man himself. If he knew Marathi, he would answer my question. If not, I’ll move to the next house.

I asked, “Can you guide me to Gangadhar Shashtri Telang’s house?”

“Why?”

“I wish to meet him.”

“Come on in.”

When I stepped inside, I found quite a few grey-haired disciples seated before him, their books spread open. Now I was convinced the man was none other than Gangadhar Shashtri. Offering my salutations, I settled in a corner.

He asked me, “What brings you here?”

“I wish to study Shastra under your guidance.”

“Which Shastra – *Nyaya* or *Vyakarana*?”

“Primarily *Nyaya*, but some *Vyakarana* to begin with.”

“If you wish to study *Nyaya*, I can introduce you to one good tutor. Since I specialize in *Vyakarana*, I lack adequate knowledge of *Nyaya*.”

“Whatever you know would suffice for me because I wish to learn Sanskrit *Rupavali* alone.”

“Meet me again and we’ll discuss in greater detail. For now, attend to other chores like your lodging and boarding arrangements.”

Saying so he concluded the conversation. I also happened to meet his elder son Dhundiraj Shashtri on the same day.

With an intention to fix my pending sustenance issue, I sent another letter of reminder to Dr. Wagle and yet again I was left waiting for his reply. Meanwhile, Govindrao Palekar’s illness worsened and as per his wishes, I sent a telegram to his grandson Shri Moreshwar Waman Palekar. Within three-four days, the grandson reached Kashi along with his colleague Shri Paradkar. On the second or third day following his arrival, Govindrao breathed his last. The funeral formalities

like bathing on the Ghats and eating at odd hours took a toll on my health and I was down with high fever within no time. Eventually I had to be admitted to a Kashi hospital in a palanquin arranged by Shri Paradkar.

Bizarre Hospital

The hospitals of this region are downright pathetic. My bed was battered, full of cracks. If this was not enough, the patient next to me, a young man inflicted with venereal disease, lay in a half-naked state. I felt like running away from the place but alas! I had no option but to stay put for four days. The only solace was the fact that Dhundiraj Shashtri and Shri Paradkar paid a visit, almost daily, to enquire about my health.

The less said about the food the better. They served *Sabudana Kheer* (Tapioca Pudding), mixed with jaggery in lieu of sugar, and only one bowl per person. Dal-rice was also available but was of very poor quality. I had once been to the Sassoon Hospital of Pune. Compared to its excellent facilities; the Kashi Hospital seemed in dire straits. After spending four torturous days at the hospital, I thankfully returned to the Shenvi *Mutt* of Durga Ghat.

Shri Moreshwar, Shri Paradkar and others were happy to see me back. At this time, the *Mutt* in-charge was a Kokanastha Brahmin named Chidamber Godbole. While Govindrao was alive, Chidamber never dared to speak a word against him. Govindrao often cautioned me, “Beware, this Chidamber is a fraud. He may whisk away your belongings.” But after Govindrao’s demise, Chidamber prepared a long list of dues that allegedly held Govindrao as his debtor for a sum of 100 to 200 rupees. He then sent one Mr. Pashupatinath to pester Govindrao’s grandson about the dues. The very next day after my return from the hospital, Pashupatinath confronted Shri Moreshwar in my presence. Even Chidamber was at the *Mutt*. When Shri Moreshwar briefed me about the whole thing, I asked Chidamber, “You claim Govindrao owed you the said money. How come you never broached the subject even once during his lifetime? Why didn’t you meet him while he was ailing?” Chidamber was taken aback by my sudden assault and quietly retreated, muttering in anger, “Have I prepared a fake list or what?” He never troubled Govindrao’s grandson again. Quite obviously, he now hated me more than anyone else.

After carrying out the last rites of Govindrao, Shri Moreshwar and Shri Paradkar went back home. My sustenance issue was

yet unresolved. I saw no point in awaiting Dr. Wagle’s reply anymore. One day I directly approached a senior official of the Balaji trust and told him, “I am a poor student of Shenvi caste. I would be most obliged if you allow me to dine at your *Anna Chatra*.” When he came to know of my name, he exclaimed, “Oh! I have been waiting for you. I have received a recommendation letter from Gwalior on your behalf. But I had no idea about your whereabouts. Anyway, meet me at the *Chatra* tomorrow noon. I will instruct the manager to make necessary arrangements. But you would be served only in the second batch since you are a Shenvi. That’s the custom here and I can’t help it.”

The senior official did keep his word. From the next day onwards I was allowed to join the second batch at the *Balaji Chatra*. All this while I wondered who could have sent the letter from Gwalior. Subsequently, a letter from Mr. Malap cleared all doubts. Shri Malap was a tenant at the house of Sardar Shitole, brother-in-law of the reigning Maharaja of Gwalior. Considering my predicament, Shri Malap secured a recommendation letter signed by Sardar Shitole’s personal assistant and had it dispatched to the *Chatra* officials. Not that the assistant was any influential authority, he was a mere clerk of salary 30-40 rupees, but for the *Chatra* officials his

word was their command. Whatever the reason, I was happy to have finally fixed my long pending sustenance problem.

The Anna Chatra experience

Being a mere five–seven people served in the second batch, the *Chatra* officials could have easily accommodated us in the first seating. But they probably feared the impending wrath of the South Indian Brahmins if they did so.

The quality of the meals in our round heavily depended on the load of diners in the first lot. If the attendance was more than usual in the first round, the Dal served to us would become excessively watery as if a running stream of Ganges flowed through it! The vegetables were invariably missing from our plates. Once in a while, we were served *Pithle* (Gram flour curry) in place of vegetable gravy. In all probability, the rice that found no takers in Kashi was served at the *Anna Chatra*! Chapattis however were of good quality and there was no restriction on the number of helpings. But ghee was strictly one spoonful. Occasionally we were also served *kadhi* (yogurt curry). Again subject to the number of diners in the first batch, our lunch time could be anywhere from 12 noon to 4 pm in the evening. Sometimes we even had to wait for

three hours for the meals. I always had a copy of *Kaumudi*, *Bhagwadgita* or some such book handy to keep me gainfully occupied on such days.

I had barely completed three months in Kashi when a student named Neelkanth Bhat Gaitonde arrived here. He had already completed his study of *Vedas* at the Kavle *Mutt* but a strong urge to study the *Shastras* had brought him back to Kashi. He initially dined at the *Ahilyabai Chatra* but since *Balaji Chatra* was way closer to the Bramha Ghat, he joined me. He loathed the fact that we were purposely made to sit in the second row and harped on the need to report this misconduct to the Maharaja of Gwalior. His pet peeve was, “If I could speak Marathi like you, I would have taught these people a good lesson. How can you tolerate this injustice?”

My retort weakened his rant if only for a while, “You can afford to feel the way you do. If *Balaji Chatra* closes its doors on you, you can always fall back on *Ahilya Chatra* but what about me? Suppose I escalate the matter to the higher-ups and an officer is sent for investigation, the first thing these folks would do is to throw me out of the *Chatra* and would subsequently downplay the matter by filing a favourable report. Worse the Saraswat community will disown me for

needlessly raking up this issue. The end result would be pretty obvious. I would have to wind up my studies and bid good bye to Kashi for good, precisely why I wish to keep mum. I see no harm in bearing with some insult in exchange of an assured meal every day on which my health squarely depends.”

Mrutyunjay was a Saraswat Brahmin hailing from Cochin. Such was his nuisance that I felt as if his presence in Kashi was preordained to complete the vicious circle of atrocities for me, perhaps as a consequence of my misdeeds of a previous birth. He had come to Kashi at a very young age. During the initial years, few people tried hard to teach him *Shastras* but all their discourses fell on deaf ears. By the time I began my Kashi penance, Mrutyunjay had already completed fifteen years in Kashi. He was a regular diner at the *Balaji Chatra* but, in the past, he had been banished once or twice from the *Chatra* for his foul mouth and misdemeanour. Thanks only to the intervention of few compassionate widows from the *Mutt* kitchen, he was allowed entry subsequently. Once bitten twice shy that he was, he never dared to lock horns with the *Mutt* authorities any more. No wonder the assault of his venomous blabber was now directed towards harmless and non-interfering souls like me and Nilkanthbhatji. Of the two, he took a fancy to me. Initially he tried to make friends

with us but given his wont of bad mouthing people behind their backs, we choose to keep safe distance. This angered him no end and in turn we became his pet targets. His biggest premonition for us was that we, being students of *Shastras*, would eventually and wrongfully exploit our knowledge for our living and hence would go to hell. We often heard him telling other Brahmins at the *Chatra*, “I am in Kashi for over 15 years now but I never bothered to learn the *Shastras*. Few ignorant fools did try to influence me but to no avail. I don't wish to go hell by putting such sacred knowledge on sale. These *Anna Chatras* are not for *Shashtra* students; they are only for those committed to the rigours of penance: Bathe in the Ganges and dine here. Nothing more, nothing less!”

He was particularly friendly with one Brahmin who dined in the second row out of sheer compulsion. He had to skip the first batch as during that time he begged for alms to support his illicit family. Only after handing over the daily alms to his keep did he find time for his own lunch at the *Chatra*. Although he and Mrutyunjay formed an inseparable pair, they fought with each other at times. But both ridiculed us every day without fail. Nilkanthbhatji could not stand Mrutyunjay's presence but, like me, he chose to keep mum and never confronted him.

In my case, the atrocities of *Anna Chatra* were eclipsed by the sanctity of my *Gyan Chatra* (hub of learning) in the hallowed company of my Guru. And in exchange of this great solace, all I had offered Gangadharshashtri was a rupee and a coconut. He had assigned me to one of his prime disciples Shri Nageshwarpant Dharmadhikari who diligently taught me every morning for one hour beginning at 7 am daily. But I lingered at his place till 10 am every day, grasping the lessons imparted to other students. In the evening, Gangadharshashtri's step brother Laxmanshastri taught literature to me and a couple of other students. I was a pet student of both my Gurus. They often lent me their own books and helped me with my study in every possible manner.

As mentioned before, I had crossed swords with Chidamber Godbole following Govindrao Palekar's demise. He could not tolerate the fact that I stayed at the *Mutt* on Durga Ghat. He raked up some trivial issue only to make my life difficult. He confronted me openly one day, "Pay rent if you wish to stay here, else leave this place. If you don't, I'll throw your belongings on the street outside." There was no point arguing with him but the fact remained that I had nowhere to go. I tried my luck at a prominent *Mutt* situated on Bramha

Ghat, owned by some Swami from Cochin. But the manager of the *Mutt* Madhavacharya blatantly refused to lend me shelter. Now I had no option but to stay on the banks of the Ganges. But one Shri Krishnaji Sathe (now renowned in Mumbai as the co-owner of the enterprise *Appashastris, Sathe and Vaidya*) unexpectedly came to my rescue. I knew him from before as I had often taken him to my Gurus Gangadharshashtri and Nageshwarshastri. When he learnt of my problem, he asked me to stay with him in his room at the *Sanglikar Wada* on Bramha Ghat where he was put up at that time. I feared that the manager of the *Sanglikar Wada* would not approve of my stay as I was a Shenvi and consequently even Shri Sathe may have to vacate his room for helping me out.

But he somehow managed to convince the manager and secured permission for my accommodation for a few days. I stayed at the Wada for a month and a half till one day Madhavacharya bumped into me on the Ghat. He asked, "Why do you stay at the *Sanglikar Wada*? We have ample room at our *Mutt*." I was surprised at his sudden change of heart. Just a while back he had no time for me and now he was making an unconditional offer. I initially didn't concede to his proposition but following his persistent requests I shifted

base to his *Mutt*. I was still clueless about Madhavacharya's dramatic transformation. I presume either Nilkanthbhatji would have put in a good word on my behalf or maybe Madhavacharya would have been impressed with my studious nature. Whatever the case, I didn't need to fret about my lodging anymore. Subsequently Nilkanthbhatji left his abode in the *Durga Ghat Mutt* and joined me here. Madhavacharya had one room refurbished out of his own proceeds, exclusively for our stay.

Plague in Kashi

Kashi was hit by a horrendous plague epidemic in March 1901. Many cases of the dreaded disease erupted in our own locality. One of the unfortunate victims was a milkman known to me who was our next-door neighbour. We were petrified with the string of deaths all around us but could not think of fleeing the town for outside of Kashi the problem of sustenance would come back to haunt us again.

During these turbulent times Nageshwarpant Dharmadhikari tried to console us. He said, "Rather than perish anywhere else, it's much better to die in Kashi. For it's here alone that our dead bodies will be shoved into the Ganges. What better

can we ask for? People from far and wide settle in Kashi such that they can breathe their last in this pious town. Hence it would be imprudent to leave this place plagued by the fear of plague." In reality we hardly believed we would become sanctified if and when our dead bodies fell into the Ganges. Given an option we would have moved to another place without second thought.

One day I was down with high fever all of a sudden. I suspected it was plague and hence asked Nilkanthbhatji to vacate the room immediately. He was otherwise very timid by nature but that day he showed exceptional courage. He told me resolutely, "Come what may, I won't leave you in this state. If it comes to death, we'll both die together." He didn't even move his bedding away from mine and later brought me some prescription from the doctor. I felt better with the medicine within a week but the weakness remained for several days. Madhavacharya's wife took good care of me during my convalescence. This devout lady woke up early every morning to cook food in line with my recommended dietary regimen. It won't be an exaggeration to say that she cared for me like one would for her son or younger brother. In two weeks, I was back to normal and resumed my routine of dining at the *Balaji Chatra*.

The wrath of plague was still at its peak. Owing to the acute dearth of manpower to carry the mounting pile of dead bodies, crooked hand-carts had to be used for the purpose, we were told. We slept on the terrace at night as the summer heat made it impossible to stay indoors. From there, the blazing funeral pyres of the *Manikarnika Ghat* were clearly visible. Loud cries would often wake us up from our slumber as corpse after corpse was towed for cremation at odd hours. With time we were eventually habituated to this horrifying dance of death and no longer lost sleep over it. Although Gangadharshastri was out of town with his family, Shri Dharmadhikari had stayed put in Kashi. As a result our learning didn't suffer much even during this unsettling period.

The plague disappeared before the onset of monsoon. Life was back to normal save for the fact that my *Dhotis* (garment worn by male Hindus) were tattered by now. But I had no money to buy new pairs. I wrote to Dr. Wagle to send me at least five rupees for the purpose but, as expected, he didn't reply. I then wrote to Shri Vishnu Naik. He had invariably sent replies in the past but not this time. I don't exactly remember whether I wrote to Shri Bhiku Naik or not but probably I would have. All doors seemed closed on me.

Disowned by all, I now made a fresh resolve: I would never ever beg before my friends and acquaintances for help. I would instead rely on my own acumen and prudence to overcome every challenge in life. In a place like Kashi, even manual labour would not have fetched even a rupee. But I was determined to work my way around the problem.

A gentleman of surname Goswami, a religious guru of the Gujarati community, lived in Kashi and was also a student of Gangadharshastri. He was on the lookout for a copy of *Amarkosh* with Marathi meanings cited aside the Sanskrit shlokas. I had one such copy printed by the *Nirnaysagar* press. I was ready to lend it to him for study but he wished to buy it. The original price was 1.25 rupees. I told him, "I would have given it to you free of cost in the normal course. But since I am in need of money right now, pay me one rupee." Shri Goswami paid me the original price of 1.25 rupees despite my repeated pleas in favour of the reduced amount.

With the proceeds, I bought a pair of *panchas* (cotton towels) in exchange of a rupee and two annas. This thin fabric wouldn't have lasted beyond two-three months. So I decided to save every paisa that I received from the *Chatra*. By not spending it towards the oil lamp, I planned to accumulate a rupee in a

couple of months to buy another pair. We were entitled to a daily grant of one paisa at the *Chatra*. We normally used this money to buy oil for the lantern as also to purchase rice for *Ekadashi* days when the *Chatras* were closed.

Dharmadhikari solved our *Ekadashi* issue by granting us provisions from a grocer once a week. He would furnish a note to Nilkanthbhatji with needful instructions addressed to the grocer. We stored the provisions at Madhavacharya's place and dine there on every *Ekadashi*. But the oil for the lantern still posed a problem. So we thought of a unique way out. Every night we revised only those lessons that we had already memorized. For instance, Nilkanthbhatji would recite the *Ashtadhyayi* and I would repeat after him. This after-dark drill continued for days together and eliminated the need for the night lantern. What's more, it helped us both accrue an amount of four annas each.

Timely help from Guno Hajam

I have not yet introduced a gentleman called Pandharinath *Hajam* (Barber Pandharinath) to my readers. The people of Madgaon knew him better as Guno *Hajam*. Guno was born in Mardhol, near the Mahalasa temple. He must be of my

age. Despite having been born in a region like Mardhol, he has steered clear of all bad habits including tobacco which is otherwise common among Goans of all ages. Through his own initiative he has gained proficiency in various arts, that too in his spare time. He draws excellent sketches; knows mud carving and is also adept at book binding. Currently he runs a biscuit making business in Madgaon. After coming across a biscuit-making machine in Bombay, he assembled a variety of scrap items together and created a machine based on the original prototype. Towards this effort he became a blacksmith in his own right. Thanks to this appliance, he made a foray into the biscuit business. This is not the appropriate space though to elaborate his versatility. It would merit a separate article.

Pandharinath first came to our house in 1892. For some time he commuted from Mardhol to our place in the capacity of a barber. But later he settled near our house with his family. Both I and Sonba Mulgaonkar were drawn to him for his traits of sincerity, sanctity, non-addiction and thirst for knowledge. The more we disliked the misguided fools frequenting the homes of courtesans in temple environs; the more we adored Guna for his industrious nature despite his birth in the notorious vicinity of the Mardhol temple. Goa is full of indolent young

men who fall prey to gambling and other bad habits and thereby squander their inherited wealth in non-productive and lavish endeavours. If our nation is blessed with more people like Guno and if they are provided with quality education in their formative years, we would undoubtedly make phenomenal progress in all spheres.

Now I turn to the context in which I remembered Guno. Of the umpteen letters I wrote asking for help from friends and acquaintances, one was addressed to Guno as well. I had little hope of any help from him given his own status of limited means. At the most, I hoped he would borrow a rupee or two from someone to help me out. I recall having specifically asked him to send borrowed money alone.

A registered post from Guna dropped at my door one day, long after I had purchased the pair of *panchas* from Goswami's money and after I had saved four annas, thanks to the dark nights deprived of lantern light. The post had a ten rupee English note. Guno claimed he had borrowed the money from his sister. I was not happy with the fact that he had troubled his sister on my account but his help was indeed timely, and at a time when most of my friends had chosen to look away. Guno's money helped me counter

the winter of 1901.

Shri Moreshwar Palekar had, on one occasion, offered me his quilt of good quality. But with no idea of the severity of a North Indian winter, I had declined his help. In 1900, I somehow survived that winter on a frayed quilt lent by Kashibai. I duly returned it to her during summer time. I had no pillow for a long time. Later I made two makeshift pillows of stuffed carpet rags lying in a corner of Madhavacharya's *Mutt*, one for myself and the other for Nilkanthbhatji's use. The pillows were softer than rocks and the *Anna Chatra* food was sweeter than *Konda* (corn husk). So it would not be inappropriate to say that we experienced the essence of the Marathi proverb *Corn husk for sustenance and hard rock for a pillow* throughout our Kashi penance.

Pillow was never a problem, the quilt indeed was. It was impossible to borrow Kashibai's quilt again but even if she did oblige us, the tattered cloth, resembling a dilapidated fortress demolished by canyon fire, was no protection for the harsh winter. The stuffed cotton was bursting at the seams and had left many a gaping hole in the fabric.

In such a depressing scenario, Pandharinath *Hajam's* timely

help resolved the winter issue in one stroke. I bought a new white blanket for two rupees. I already had another brought from Pune. I survived the 1901 winter on these two blankets coupled with the coat lent by Dr. Wagle. Guno's help literally brought light back in our home. We resumed spending money for the oil from the *Anna Chatra* grant.

Gateway to Nepal

A young Nepali named Durganath stayed at our *Mutt* and also studied under our Guru Nageshwarpant Dharmadhikari. I had not forgotten Dr. Bhandarkar's mention of Nepal as a crucial landmark in the context of Buddhism studies. Sensing Durganath could prove helpful in this endeavour, I befriended him. When I learnt he was to leave for Nepal in January 1902, I requested him to take me along. But a visit to Nepal was easier said than done. First and foremost, no one could cross the border without the requisite pass issued by the Nepal government. The second challenge was the exceptionally strenuous route to Kathmandu replete with towering mountain ranges. Thirdly, I had only three-four rupees left with me. If I could somehow secure the Nepal pass, I was ready to work my way around the other two headaches. It so happened that Durganath's grandfather was a key official in the Chief

General's office. On my insistence Durganath secured a pass for me through his grandfather's intervention and we both got ready to leave Kashi on February 2.

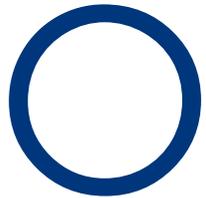
I had met *Ved Shastra Sampanna* Kalyanshastri of Kolhapur during one of his Kashi visits. He was elderly and suffered from a marked weakness in one leg. I had helped him in moving around from place to place on several occasions. As an expression of his gratitude, he gifted me a copy of *Siddhant Koumudi* at the time of leaving Kashi. I found the book immensely useful and it formed the mainstay of my Sanskrit learning. Kalyanshastri came to Kashi one more time before I left for Nepal. He asked a few questions to test my knowledge and was satisfied with my replies. Happy to note my academic progress in the short span, he assured me of a job of 50-60 rupees salary in Kolhapur in a year or two. I told him, "Right now, I am headed towards Nepal. If I come back safe and sound, I can make further plans." Without further ado, he handed me four rupees for conveyance.

My Guru was mighty upset with my Nepal plan. Dharmadhikari and Laxmanshastri assumed I would return soon, hence they didn't dissuade me much. But Gangadharshastri was dead against the idea. He knew a bit of astrology based on

which he predicted a chain of looming dangers that were to befall on me within a month or two. Therefore he felt I should stay put in Kashi till such time. Trying my best to make him think otherwise, I reasoned, “If I am destined to suffer the said hazards, how would I escape them in Kashi. And if I am ordained to die on the way to Nepal, how can I dodge the inevitable?” After much argument, he finally succumbed to my reasoning and reluctantly gave his consent.



10. MISSION NEPAL



n Feb 2, 1901, three of us left Kashi - I, Durganath and one of his aides. The next day we reached Raxaul, a railway station close to the Nepal border. The Birganj station of Nepal is about two miles from here. We survived on the snacks we had carried with us and spent the night at a place near the station. The next day we crossed the Nepal border at the stroke of dawn. My shoes, lent to me by Madhavacharya, were by now in very bad shape. As soon as I removed them to discard them, I found my right foot wholly drenched in blood. The bleeding from the shoe bite had long frozen but I didn't feel the clot in the extreme cold. We reached Birganj at a time when its inhabitants were still in their beds.

I have mentioned earlier that I misplaced the notebook with detailed account of my journey at this juncture. Since I now write from my memory alone, I am likely to miss out the details of a few halts on the way. We had lunch at Birganj before we moved ahead. I had carried my dumbbells along which I deposited with a shopkeeper there. Now I was left with three

blankets – one lent by Madhavacharya and two my own – besides few books. We couldn't find a porter and hence I had to carry the baggage myself. After walking for about two-three miles, I was completely exhausted. For one, I had not had enough food during the three days of travel. For a frail man like me, it was impossible to cover the said distance with my baggage etched to me. I thought of turning back time and again but the magnetic pull of *Buddha* kept me going. At last we bumped into a Muslim porter who agreed to carry my luggage till Bhimphedi in exchange of one and half rupee. Our first halt was at a place five miles away from Bhimphedi. (I don't remember the name of the place now) Here I survived the night on *Poha* (beaten rice) and jaggery. The next day, it was a Wednesday I presume, we walked for about 10 miles on an average to reach a point which marks the end of the plains and the beginning of the forest area located at the foothills of the Himalayas. Nepal is primarily divided into two regions – Pahadi Muluk and Terai. The Terai region has been consigned to Nepal by the British government. Its populace is largely comprised of *Hindustani* people but

the government officials are invariably Nepali. One of their top authorities is stationed at Birganj. Nepal government's revenue proceeds from the Terai are probably much more than that from the Pahadi Muluk. Rice is the staple crop here. The famous Kanpuri rice presumably comes from this region. Despite the fertile soil, the region is considered inhabitable by most Nepalis for its known endemicity to malaria. Durganath was in a hurry to leave this place behind, anxious to catch a glimpse of the towering mountains of the Pahadi Muluk. He ran like a speeding arrow while I moved at a snail's pace. Two helpers sent by his grandfather met us midway. They merrily laughed at me even as I gasped for breath from the exertion. I was truly baffled by their brazen cruelty. The Muslim porter, thankfully, was quite sympathetic towards me. On Thursday noon, we had food alongside a flowing stream. I cooked rice in a pan that Durganath gave me. In the gushing winds around, the rice remained half-cooked, soft at one end and raw at the other. Sensing my discomfort, Durganath cooked for me from that day onwards.

Nepalese Bath

As we passed through the dense forests at the foothills of the mountains, away from the Terai, my physical agony intensified.

In the biting cold of the morning, blood oozed from my feet as the wounds opened. The dust of the roads settled on the wounds and caused further misery. At nightfall we settled in some shopkeeper's hut on the way and resumed journey at dawn. Food was cooked sometime in the afternoon, a simple meal of rice and the liquid extract of a Nepalese variety of boiled *Amsol* (dried mangosteen) but I relished it every bit, hungry that I invariably was. We survived the nights on the *Poha* and jaggery purchased from the roadside shops. The jaggery was overpriced but tasteless, so I preferred to eat the *Poha* alone.

Our path ran parallel to a river. Each morning Durganath would tell me his bath was long over while I was still wrapped in my blankets. I was left wondering: when did he get up, when did he go to the river and how did he manage a bath in the freezing cold. I gaped in open admiration, "You Nepalese are really tough people; you seem to withstand any kind of weather. I can't even think of bathing in the river in the wee hours."

On the third day of our journey from Birganj, we spent the night at a shopkeeper's hut by the river. But the trail towards the river was not an easy tread. There was an alternative

route, a cliff path that was downright dangerous. The next morning I woke up early but lay wrapped in my sheets to escape the biting cold. Just then Durganath woke up. He dipped his fingers in a copper cup filled with water and wetted his face at different spots in quick succession: first the tip of his tiny tuft, followed by temples, eyes and forehead.

He turned to me and asked, “You are still in bed and here I am done with my bath even.”

I asked him, “I am wide awake; it’s the cold that has kept me in bed. But when did you take your bath? I never saw you go towards the river.”

He exclaimed, “You say you were up early. Didn’t you see me take bath from this copper cup over here?”

Finally the mystery surrounding the Nepalese bath was unravelled. In the past I had heard of the Marwari custom of two-three people bathing from one pitcher of water. Had they known the Nepali technique, one pitcher would have been more than sufficient to bathe 100 Marwaris. From that day I practiced the Nepalese bath till the time I was with Durganath.

On Friday night we reached Bhimphedi, the first point of Nepal’s biggest Ghat section. We spent the night at a shopkeeper’s hut. The Muslim porter now wished to call it a day. I tried hard to persuade him to be with me till Kathmandu but he probably feared the hostility of the *Gorkhas*. He was firm on his decision of turning back. We had mutually agreed that he came with me till Bhimphedi alone, so I had no option but to let him go. As replacement Durganath hired two Bhotia helpers for the onward journey but they demanded advance payment. I had few Nepali coins with me that I had exchanged for an English coin at Birganj (One English note fetched around two and a half Nepalese coins.) After paying the Muslim porter and the Bhotia helpers their respective dues, I was left with only one coin. As I handed it over to the shop lady to buy some *Poha*, it slipped through my hand and rolled into the shop interiors. The shopkeeper and his wife both pretended to search for it for a while but soon raised their hands on the pretext that they couldn’t find it. I had to borrow money from Durganath to pay for the *Poha*.

The next day we left early morning to cross the first Ghat or *Gadhi* as the Nepali people call it. Probably the full name is *Khari Gadhi*. Its summit is heavily patrolled by the Nepal government. A thorough search is carried out on every visitor

and access is denied without the requisite pass. Durganath had five passes in all which meant the Bhotia helpers had to be left out.

It was then decided that the Bhotias would proceed further while I carried my luggage till some point beyond the check post. The Bhotias, being locals, didn't need a pass, not unless they accompanied foreign tourists. Already the climb had drained me and now I had the load back on my back. I somehow reached the check post where the policemen whisked off a pair of socks during the baggage search. Post the search I moved ahead but the Bhotias were nowhere in sight. I later came to know they were relaxing at the point where we were to make the next halt. This place was still a mile away; it was unthinkable for me to cover the distance with the luggage on. So, I tucked my luggage under a tree and virtually collapsed on the ground from exhaustion.

Durganath and his helpers reached the meeting point and not seeing me around, he ordered the Bhotia porters to turn back and look for me. They eventually found me and took my luggage on their backs. I admonished them for their negligence of duty but I could not gauge their reaction since

they didn't seem to understand my language. Anyway, the snooze under the tree gave me the strength to get back on my feet again and I managed to touch the halting point in due course.

Durganath had kept lunch ready – again the same meal of rice and *Amsol* water. We were at a vantage point on the banks of a stream which offered us a breath-taking view of the natural splendour around. Sadly the spot had been fouled and littered with human excreta and urine. And yet I relished the meal prepared by Durganath in the midst of the filthy surroundings. On a normal day that would have been unthinkable.

Durganath was now desperate to get home. He left in the middle of the night leaving us behind. We spent the night in an open *DharmashaLa* after eating a snack of *Poha*. The cold weather had made both my legs numb and lifeless. I felt as if they had melted away. Needless to say I couldn't sleep well. The next day i.e. on February 9, we resumed the barefoot journey on the snow-laden path at the stroke of dawn. I felt as if I was walking on a frying pan. But just then, bright sunshine swept the horizon with its divine light and the snow melted within no time. My discomfort subsided if not

evaporated. Around 8 am, we climbed the second Ghat called *Chandra Gadhi*. We could clearly see the majestic snow-laden Himalayan ranges from the summit. For a second, the inspiring sight made me forget all about my fatigue. The flowing verse of *Kavi Kulguru Kalidasa* has aptly captured the splendour of these snowy peaks:

Towards the north lies a celestial being, the monarch of mountains called the Himalayas. Touching the ocean beds on either side, this peak is the yardstick of the earth's dimension.

The great Himalayas, chosen abode of saints and ascetics, initiator of pious and religious thought in the minds of the beholder...which son of India won't feel blessed at the spectacle of its silvery, shining peaks? Words fail me in recounting the soul-stirring thought waves that swept my mind on this occasion. Hailing from a backward region like the Gomantak, even a visit to Kashi was a phenomenal achievement for me. We Goans reckon even the Sahyadri Mountains to be an arduous climb. And today I was here on the summit of *Chandra Gadhi* in Nepal savouring the beauty of the snow-peaked Himalayas. This is not to imply that I managed this feat on the strength of exemplary courage

or physical endurance. You wouldn't find another soul who detests travel as much as I do. As for stamina even a short journey is enough to cause me severe distress. Beyond doubt it's only my unconditional devotion to Lord *Buddha* that's blessed me with the divine sight of the *Nagadhiraja* (Paramount king of the mountains)

After having lunch following our descent down the *Chandra Gadhi*, we reached Durganath's home at around five in the evening. Durganath's father and grandfather were warm and hospitable to me. They served me a hearty supper, undoubtedly the best meal of my brief Nepal stint. I slept in the open space of the ground floor. Durganath's father prepared my bedding and gave me a thick Nepali blanket for cover. I had a *Dhabli* (small woollen shawl) that served as a *Sovale* (holy garment) while dining at the *Chatra*. I cut it into two and wrapped a piece to each of my feet. This protection lessened the severity of the extreme cold. I woke up early the next day for a quick Nepalese Bath. I was served an early lunch at nine. In Nepal even Brahmins are meat-eaters but Durganath didn't wish to let me know the fact that he was a non-vegetarian. So he asked his mother to serve me separately. After lunch Durganath took me out on a temple tour to the principle deities of Kathmandu.

Temples or Shambles

There are many temples in Kathmandu but the main two are *Guheshwari* and *Pashupati*. We first went to *Guhyeshwari*. Nepalese temples are no great shakes in terms of architecture and *Guhyeshwari* was no exception. The temple top is made of gold and silver and there's a small courtyard in its interiors. Towards one side of the courtyard is an impersonation of the Female *Yoni* (womb), one palm wide and one and a half palm long.

There are a few sculptures similar to those of the village deities in India like *Mhasoba* and *Dagdoba*. The courtyard, including the stone idols, is invariably drenched in blood which is why the place more resembles a slaughterhouse than a temple. We saw a stray dog licking blood in the open premises. Some distance away, a priest was performing a pooja while a Brahmin chanted the *Shatchandi* hymn. I was perturbed by the spine-chilling spectacle. Just then a priest offered us *Tirth-Prasad*, some kind of Nepalese toddy of strange odour. Sensing my discomfort, Durganath advised, "Should you not wish to consume it, just apply it on your forehead and eyes." Saying so, he did the same himself. Seizing the opportunity I threw the toddy away before he opened his eyes.

On our way back, we saw a dome-shaped Buddhist *Stupa* (mound-like structure containing Buddhist relics). I had never seen a *Stupa* before so I asked Durganath, "Which is that temple?" He replied, "That's a Buddhist shrine, please look away, else you would have to take another bath to cleanse yourself, so say our *Shastras*!" I was dumbfounded by his logic. It was perfectly alright to consume toddy as Prasad but even the distant sight of a *Stupa* was considered ominous. I never knew that the Nepalese people hated Buddhism to such an extent. There was no point broaching the subject with Durganath given every possibility of him spearheading my torture lest he came to know of my unabiding faith in Buddhism. Without a word I showed my back to the *Stupa* and followed him to the *Pashupatinath* temple.

This tiny temple, situated at a height, comprises a large four-faced *Mahadev Linga* (phallic form). The priests here are South Indians and there's no animal sacrifice done here though it does happen in the smaller temples in close vicinity like the *Gorakshnath* temple where even the saintly idol of *Gorakshnath* is found soaked in blood.

The temple priest Krishnashastri Dravid happened to be our Guru Gangadharshastri Telang's mentor. Even

Nageshwaripant Dharmadhikari had studied under his tutelage for some time. Nageshwaripant had asked me to convey his regards to Krishnashastri Dravid at the time of leaving Kashi but I couldn't meet him that day as he was engaged in pooja which was to conclude only at 3 pm. However he sent a message for me asking me to meet him next day evening. From *Pashupati* temple we went homewards.

The next day at 7 am, after morning ablutions and a Nepalese bath, Durganath's father took me out to Commander-in-chief Bhim Samsher's bungalow to show me a glimpse of a Nepalese Appeal procedure. The morning dew made me slightly uneasy on the way. The commander's bungalow was a three storeyed house with a large compound. When we reached there we found around 25 guards parading on the ground. Just then the commander appeared in a window of the third floor accompanied by his assistant. A prominent sacred mark on his forehead seemed to suggest that he had just about concluded his (Nepalese?) bath. Though the commander supposedly belonged to the *Kshatriya* clan, his frame was more Mongoloid in appearance. No sooner had he had opened the window, throngs of commoners below caused mayhem by offering their vociferous salutations,

each man bowing down in hysterical fashion. Just about everyone voiced their grievances at the top of their voices. Not a word could be heard. One guard then silenced the crowd and ordered the plaintiffs to brief the facts of their cases, one after another.

One allegation was about someone having been disowned by the community without good reason. The commander immediately ordered an escalation of the matter to the *Rajguru* (Head of state). There were many more complaints, some the Commander asked the assistant to make note of and the rest he settled on the spot with a negative answer. The modus operandi of giving instant judgments was unique indeed for it saved invaluable time and expense spent on lawyers, judges, high courts et al. More important, the Nepali people seemed reasonably happy with it. At least it saved them the bankruptcy resulting from the vicious circle of court payments, stamp duties and lawyer fees. However I found the practice of bowing down before the Commander highly deplorable.

I reached Krishnashastri's house the next day, 15 minutes ahead of the appointed hour. The Shastri, done with his *Puja*, was having lunch. He met me at about 3.30 pm and inquired after Gangadharshastri, Nageshwaripant Dharmadhikari and

other disciples. Before I left he handed me the *Pashupati* Prasad, sacred ash and four Nepali coins for conveyance. I was almost broke at that time; hence this unexpected gain was a pleasant surprise. He asked me to meet him one more time when possible and retired to his quarters for his siesta. Out of the proceeds received from Shastri, I purchased a pair of Nepali boots worth two Nepali coins. But the resultant shoe bite only added to the long list of my physical woes!

I was keen on visiting the *Buddha Stupa*. But as mentioned before, I didn't wish to let Durganath about my aspiration. One afternoon I discreetly went up to the *Stupa* site in the hope of meeting some Buddhist scholar or saint. But save for a few seers busy rolling dice and a butcher selling goat meat, there was no one else in sight. I was deeply pained by the depressing sight. Had Nepal lost all respect for Buddhism? Even in the capital city of Kathmandu? Calming my grief-stricken mind with great difficulty, I looked around for some learned saint but the only Sadhus around were the pedestrian foretellers who predicted the future with the roll of a dice.

I now longer saw any purpose in Nepal. But where could I go? And if there was no clue to any place where I could learn more about Buddhism, of what use was this birth? Why should

I remain alive? Crestfallen and confused, I turned pensive for a while. Durganath's grandfather had already hinted that it would be prudent for me to return to my homeland given the prevailing political turbulence in Nepal. But he didn't wish to leave my departure to my fate either.

Around the same time, a few *Kawars* (Shiv devotees who carry poles with dangling pots of Ganges water through gruelling voyages to offer the sacred water at local Shiv temples) of Badri-Kedar had camped at Kathmandu. Durganath's grandfather, who knew them from before, arranged for their accommodation and also secured a donation of 100 rupees from the Divan's bungalow. The Kawar pilgrims planned to board a Hardwar-bound train from Raxaul as the mountain path was closed due to heavy snowfall. Durganath's father recommended that I travel with them till Raxaul as he felt they would take good care of me. The arrangement seemed fine but I had no idea of my journey beyond Raxaul. Just then a thought occurred to me in a flash which ended all anxiety for good.

While at Gwalior I had read a book titled *Kashi Yatra* which made a mention of a Buddhist temple fifteen miles to the south of Gaya which was supposedly under litigation over

some dispute. I decided to spend the rest of my life at this place. It would be deserted in all probability and I would eventually die of starvation. If not anything else, my death, rooted in penance, would wipe out my disillusionment over the sorry state of Buddhism in Nepal. Who knows I could even bump into some knowledgeable Sadhu who would lend me deeper insights. I immediately told Durganath's grandfather that I was ready to travel with the Kawar pilgrims. Since they were to leave in a couple of days, I utilized the said time in gaining more information about the Nepalese populace as also to seek funds for my travel to the extent possible.

A Nepali Pandit named Aghorinath Shastri, Sanskrit teacher in a Kathmandu school, had been a student of Gangadhar Shastri. I went to meet him at the school in the earnest hope that he, like Krishnashastri Dravid, would help my cause. Compared to the Kashi School, this was much smaller with around 10 to 11 teachers, all presumably of mediocre repute. No wonder Nepali students like Durganath went all the way to Kashi to pursue their education.

I couldn't meet Aghorinath that day but another Pandit spoke to me with great affinity. But going by his conversation

I could sense that Nepalese pandits, by and large, are deprived people. There was no point in expecting any kind of help either from him or from Aghorinath. Yet I decided to pay a casual visit to Aghorinath's place.

Aghorinath's two-storeyed dwelling was located in one narrow lane. The building had clusters of cubbyhole-like rooms on all four sides arranged around an open courtyard similar to the Pune *wadas*. At the gate, a cleaning job was in progress - several Nepalese labourers were busy dumping tons of trash in a canopy. The Nepalese people dump their garbage including animal bones in their own courtyards which also serve as open toilets. The filth is allowed to pile up for about six months after which it's picked and deposited in nearby fields as fertilizer. Durganath's home followed the same system of stacking heaps of garbage in front of the house but being away from the town, the open air of the place helped me condone the stench. But Aghorinath's house was a cesspool of filth. Two kids were defecating out in the open while someone from the upper floors flung what seemed like discarded goat or sheep bones. It was unthinkable to enter the courtyard so I enquired about Aghorinath from far. When someone informed me he was not at home, I fled from the place vowing never to come back again.

State administration in Nepal

Nepali people are overtly suspicious by nature, invariably averse to lend shelter to people of other nationalities. The guests, they fear, could be foreign agents who could eventually get them in trouble. In the worst case, they could even be tried for treason. Nepal has recently undergone a state revolution. That made it difficult to converse freely with the local people. Even Durganath chose to keep mum on the political scene. Nevertheless I did get some insights into the Nepalese state administration from one or two South Indian priests as also from Krishnashastry Dravid. It would not be out of place to cite them briefly over here.

Jangbahadur was a popular name in Nepalese history. An ordinary peon once, he rose to the ranks of Chief General by killing the custodians of the then *Paanch Sarkar* (led by the Royal family) and taking over the reins in his hands. The ruling King was reduced to a pawn in Jangbahadur's machinations. Nepal's state in the Jangbahadur regime was similar to the fate of the Satara throne in Maratha history after the demise of *Shahu Chatrapati*. Jangbahadur became the head of the *Teen Sarkar* (Prime ministerial rule) and appointed his brother the Commander-in-chief.

Jangbahadur sided with the British in the mutiny of 1857 and was awarded a large piece of land near Terai in the bargain. After his demise his son was appointed the new head but he lacked the guile of his father. He was eventually slain by his cousin Virshamsher who took over the reins. His younger brother Khadagsamsher became the new Commander-in-chief, next in line Devsamsher was made the Governor while the youngest Chandrasamsher assumed the next best position in the hierarchy.

Viramsher was a reformist of sorts who ushered in a few developments in his regime. His brother Khadagsamsher discreetly engineered a conspiracy to slay him and clinch the top spot. But the plan was exposed in good time and Viramsher expelled Khadagsamsher for life and appointed Devsamsher in his place. Devsamsher became his successor by law. Though he was a little easy-going in attitude, he keenly wished to promote literacy throughout the state. He also proposed to ban the custom of slavery from Nepal. He once invited top-notch singers, dancers and performers from India and staged a mega carnival in Kathmandu. This act didn't go down well with his family members and Viramsher's sons in conjunction with their cousin Chandrasamsher hatched a plan to overthrow Devsamsher for good.

Virsamsher's daughters were given to the Nepalese King in marriage. Virsamsher's sons therefore were held in high esteem by the royalty. One day they made a proposition to Devsamsher, "We have decided to divide our father's wealth among ourselves. We seek your presence and guidance to make sure the distribution is just and fair."

Devsamsher went to his deceased brother's place with his forces of 500 armed men including Commander-in-chief Chandrasamsher. Nepal's namesake *Paanch Sarkar* king was also present on the occasion. All the militaries – of Devsamsher, of the King, of the Commander-in-chief – were lined up in the open ground outside. The brothers called Devsamsher to one of the rooms on some pretext. He obliged leaving his bodyguard behind. There he was threatened and trounced at gun point and his bodyguard was silenced in no time. Devsamsher was left with no choice but to step down and the king duly announced Devsamsher's 'directive' of appointing Chandrasamsher as the new head of state to the army battalions waiting below. The armies fired gunshots in the air to celebrate the ascension of their erstwhile Commander-in-chief to the top post. Poor Devsamsher was expelled to the Terai region that very night. This was sometime in June 1901.

The reigning Divan Chandrasamsher has passed the matriculation examination from Calcutta University. He has translated a number of books on the art of warfare in the Nepalese language. Though he remarried after the demise of his first wife in 1905, he's a sweet exception to the age-old family practice of polygamy. He did try to implement some of Devsamsher's pending developmental schemes but nothing ever came to fruition due to his overcautious policy. In fact his government banned Kolkata's Anand Bazaar Patrika following a report condemning the overnight expulsion of Devsamsher. In a nutshell Nepal has not progressed much under him and the situation of Virsamsher's time yet prevails.

I was in Kathmandu barely for eight or ten days though I don't recollect the exact date of my return journey. A Bengali headmaster Babu Sharada Prasad helped me with one English rupee. A couple of others also pitched in with some money. Krishnashastri Dravid added another two-three Nepali coins to my kitty. I was now in possession of a good five-six English rupees. Armed with this money, I bade goodbye to Kathmandu and joined the convoy of the Kawar pilgrims.



11. NEPAL TO CEYLON

My return journey was quite comfortable in the benign company of the *Kawars*. Unlike Durganath, they took a break the moment they found me weary or sluggish. They promptly took care of my lunch, carried my baggage and found shelter in such places that were a good protection from the biting cold. At Birganj I collected the dumbbells I had deposited at a shop on my way to Nepal. We parted ways at Raxaul and I gave away two of my blankets, vessel and few other things to the *Kawars* as a mark of gratitude for their wholehearted help. Now I was left with one blanket, coat, vessel, two *Dhotis*, a pair of Khadi vests, few books and the dumbbells.

A ticket to Bakipur from Raxaul cost me two rupees. I reached there the next evening. I had eight-twelve annas with me but I don't remember if I had snacks that evening. Normally I skipped meals after dark. I went straight to a *DharmashaLa* (religious sanctuary) where the chief priest allotted me some space amidst scores of slumbering saints and ascetics. The bearded fellow next to me seemed particularly unhappy with

my intrusion. He threw the choicest expletives at me. I told me in a soft tone, "Please forgive me for the inconvenience. I am here only for one night." This assurance had a soothing effect on him and he calmed down for good.

Towards *Bodh Gaya*

The Bakipur-Gaya train was scheduled to leave at 8 in the morning. I didn't have enough money on me to pay the fare of 12 annas. Next to the *Mutt* where I had checked in for the night lived an erudite *Kayasth* (members of the Hindu literate scribe caste) called Mangalprasad. I requested him to buy the dumbbell pair for 12 annas. He had no use for it but he bought it only for my sake. (I had purchased the pair in Kashi for one rupee and two annas)

Having secured the money for the fare, I immediately rushed to the station and boarded the train to Gaya. My fellow passenger, a *Tripundradhari Pandit* (worshipper of Lord Vishnu) advised me, "Gaya is a squalid town. It has no use

for a poor and needy student like you. You won't find shelter at any door. But I'll give you the address of my Ayurvedic practitioner friend. Mention my name and he'll take good care of you" I jotted down the name and address but to my mind the Pandit's description of Gaya seemed quite an exaggeration. I had no intention of contacting the Pandit's friend as I was confident of finding some or the other accommodation in Gaya. The Panditji got down at some station midway. I reached Gaya at around 12 noon.

On the station I was mobbed by a vast army of agents soliciting business on behalf of their masters, the priests of Gaya. Their sole question to me was, "Do you wish to perform *Pind daan*?" As soon as I replied in the negative, they would turn away. I went about the town looking for shelter but couldn't find space even to safeguard my luggage. One shopkeeper, having learnt that I hailed from the south, directed me to a colony of South-Indian Brahmins near Vishnupad temple. I went to the place and knocked at the door of one of the houses. The owner was presumably a *Tailangi* (belonging to Telangana district of Andhra Pradesh) Brahmin. He was not at home but few people were dining inside. A lady came out and asked me the purpose of my visit. I told her, "I seek shelter for the night and am ready to pay for my food". In

response, she parroted the standard condition, "Would you perform *Pind daan*?" As expected she closed the doors on me as soon as she heard a negative answer. I was surprised to find the entire town of Gaya obsessed with *Pind daan*. All my hopes of finding shelter or food in the town now lay crushed. I could have easily relished the best of Gaya's hospitality by falsely purporting my consent for *Pind daan* but the sly thought never crossed my mind. I would die of starvation than resort to falsehood.

As I ate a snack at a corner shop by the town lake, I recalled the advice of the Pandit I met in the train. I was not very hopeful of finding shelter at his doctor friend's place; nevertheless I decided to pay him a visit. His house was in a distant bylane and it was four in the evening by the time I reached his door. The doctor was out on work but his sixteen-year old son greeted me well. All the same he was not ready to let me stay overnight without his father's consent. My state was similar to what this phrase implies:

Leaving his physical body behind, a person arrives at his heavenly abode only to find his Karma (principle of causality where an individual's actions is believed to influence his future) waiting to greet him

Thoroughly exhausted, I kept my luggage in a corner and sat motionless for a while. My mind was completely blank, unable to confront even the basic thought of 'What next?'

In the course of my conversation with the son; I learnt that *Bodh Gaya* was about seven miles from Gaya. This was news to me; hence I asked him earnestly, "Would I reach there before nightfall if I left now?" When he replied in the affirmative, I asked him to get me a porter for the luggage. He summoned a Muslim help who demanded eight annas for the job. I only had around four annas and a paisa with me. Luckily he settled for four annas after much persuasion.

Bodh Gaya, I found out, was indeed seven miles away, not fifteen miles from Gaya away as the book *Kashi Yatra* erroneously claimed. The Muslim porter was a kind soul, albeit completely unaware of sects like Hindus, Buddhists and the like. He took me to the *Mahant* (monastery head) of the *Bodh Gaya Mutt*.

I had the impression that *Bodh Gaya* would be under the sovereign control of Buddhists but how wrong I was. Inside the *Mutt*, I saw buffalos, camels and horses lined up in mute captivity. The inner sanctum had an idol of a goddess and

a pooja was under way, conch shells being blown to glory. The disciples of the *Mahant* were relishing their Hookah fumes just outside the main door. I had never associated a Sanyasi with a Hookah before. (The 14th chapter offers detailed information about this *Mutt*)

The chief disciple took me to a room where two-three students of Sanskrit had checked in. He insisted that I have some food but when he learnt of my wont of skipping dinner, he ordered few sweetmeats from the market. The confections were of substandard quality, made of jaggery instead of sugar. I ate a tiny portion and distributed the rest to my fellow inmates. A casual conversation with the students revealed that a *Bhikshu* name Dharmopal was in *Bodh Gaya* fighting a long-drawn court battle with the *Mahant*.

Doorway to Ceylon

I could not sleep that night as I was keen to meet Dharmopal. The next day I went to the *Buddha* temple without informing anybody. The watchman of the place took me to the *Buddha* statue. To my surprise I saw a prominent *Tripundra* mark etched on the idol's forehead. I was bemused but had little time to study the temple relics or learn more about its history.

Placing a paisa (that was all I was left with) on the watchman's palm, I proceeded towards Dharampal's house situated at a height to the west of the temple. This place was the erstwhile residence of King Thibo, a house of three rooms built by the Burmese King Bhindomin. After Thibo was held captive and taken to Ratnagiri, the Burmese *Bhikshus* who stayed with him went back home and the house was confiscated by the British. Dharmapal was later allotted residential space within the premises.

I mistook a *Bhikshu* present at the place to be Dharmapal but he instantly clarified in Hindi, "I am not Dharmapal. That's his photo over there. He is currently in Ceylon." He then showed me a *Buddha* idol brought from Japan among other artefacts.

All this while I thought Pali was an ancient Siamese language since I had heard of a sacred Pali text called *Tripitak* (Three baskets) published by the king of Siam. I expectantly asked the *Bhikshu*, "Can you provide me with some more information about Pali?"

He replied, "Our religious texts are all written in the Pali language. We study them in our *Viharas* (Buddhist Monasteries) He showed me several Pali books written in Sinhalese script and also read out a few passages. Having

heard them, I ecstatically exclaimed, "This sounds almost like Sanskrit. I won't take long to learn the language."

He asked me back, "Do you know Sanskrit?"

"I have read *Koumudi*, *Tark sangrah* and other works. I have also studied Sanskrit verse."

"Then you would really find it easier to master Pali."

I immediately asked him, "Would you teach me?"

He replied, "I won't be an effective teacher. If you go to Ceylon, you'll find many well versed Pandits who can clear all your doubts."

I remarked ecstatically, "I am more than ready to visit Ceylon but I have no money."

He said, "If you go to Calcutta, the Mahabodhi Sabha could perhaps sponsor your visit. A Sinhalese Bikshu was recently here in *Bodh Gaya*. He would be leaving for Ceylon from Calcutta on March 10 after covering all other Buddhist sites. If you travel with him, you won't face any problem."

My mind raced as I tried to gauge the possibilities. That day was probably February 28. If I could reach Calcutta in the next ten days, all my wishes could be fulfilled.

But even the Calcutta visit was a challenge. How to secure four rupees and the few annas for the train fare? I asked the *Bhikshu* to lend me the requisite amount and also assured him that if the Mahabodhi Sabha refused me help, I would repay his money by selling my books.

He replied, "I have nothing to spare. But since you are the *Mahant's* guest, he could surely help you. He's a rich man."

I stayed back at *Bodh Gaya* that night. I had an abridged copy of *Amarkosh* purchased from Kashi. One of my roommates of the *Mutt* purchased it for eight annas. But none of them showed interest in *Koumudi* and other books. After lunch I went to the *Mahant* and asked him to help me for the Calcutta journey. He excused himself on the pretext that the chief *Mahant*, the man to look out for donations, was out of town. From his side, all he could afford was a rupee. I took it reluctantly and went back to the *Bhikshu* to persuade him again for the monetary help. He was certainly not in an obliging mood. He said, "You Indians are wily people,

especially the Brahmins among you. Few days back two Brahmins borrowed eight rupees from me supposedly to fund their trip to Ceylon via Calcutta. But they never went to the Mahabodhi Sabha. I have not heard from them ever since. So, I have no reason to believe your tale."

I told him, "If you don't trust me, I'll leave my coat, blanket and books with you; they would together fetch an amount of ten rupees at least. As and when I have repaid you back, you can return the books to me." But he refused to oblige me.

I left *Bodh Gaya* the next day and reached Gaya railway station at nightfall. Here I tried to solicit help from a South Indian Brahmin. I begged of him, "I have only one and a half rupees with me. I would be highly obliged if you give me three rupees in exchange of my luggage."

But he seemed to have hardened in the company of the Gaya locals. He made a ruthless counter offer, "I have spent all my money for the journey. I can give you two rupees for the stuff."

I replied, "I would have given my belongings free of cost in the normal circumstances but I am in severe need of money

right now. Treat the three rupees as a donation for a good cause if not as the worth of my belongings.”

But he didn't take pity on me. I thought against trying my luck with other passengers. They would suspect as to why I should be selling my stuff at peanut prices in a foreign land. I feared they could even hand me over to the police.

I spent the night at the station itself. I saw no point in seeking help from the Gaya locals any more. But I was still hopeful that the literate folks of Gaya would be sympathetic towards me especially when they would learn of my purpose. I instantly remembered the kind-hearted professor of Ujjaini. Sadly there was no college in Kashi. So I decided to approach the high school headmaster with my appeal. Asking for directions, I finally reached the door of Headmaster Ganguli babu. But the professor, far from helping me out, delivered a long lecture on the iniquities of charity. That day I got a first-hand experience of the oft-heard remark that Bengalis are essentially chatty people. After the discourse he took me indoors and, showing me a handloom, continued the sermon, “I have bought this handloom for the exclusive use of the women of my house, to help them make good use of their time.”

Fearing another protracted speech, I cut him short. I said, “Sir, I have not studied English but I am aware of all that you speak of. I am in a delicate situation right now and hence the appeal for aid. If you can't personally help me out, I would be obliged if you could ask your friends or students to pitch in with whatever they could.”

The headmaster now threw a tangent. He replied, “I won't ask others for help. Whatever little I can do for you, I'll do it myself. But right now I am not allowed to make any endowment following the recent demise of my ailing mother. The *Sutak* (period of mourning following the death of a family member) will end in another five-six days. But don't expect anything more than two annas from me.”

I thanked him for his patient hearing and promptly took his leave. I was now more than sure every single soul of this town was crafty and crooked, not just the commoners. Vowing to leave this town as soon as possible, I walked towards the station. That night I spent four annas on snacks. Left with a rupee and 25 paise, I looked up the railway fare chart to know which station on the Calcutta route I could travel to in the given amount. Accordingly I bought a ticket to Lakhisarai and reached there at nightfall. This was a new town with a

recently laid railway track and most shops were yet housed in hutments. I spent the night at the station. The next morning I learnt of a *DharmashaLa* nearby and immediately set off to the place. This rest house was actually a shed of sorts. I tucked my luggage in a corner and dropped to the ground. An attendant of Marwari caste brought me a few groceries from somewhere when he learnt that I was a poor student headed towards Calcutta. He also provided me with an earthen bowl and shared his recipe for making *Khichdi* (a preparation of rice and lentils.) I poured the rice, lentil, salt and other ingredients into the bowl as per his instructions. Readers can very well imagine the outcome of what was my first attempt at *Khichdi* making. But having survived on snacks all this while, I relished it to the extent possible. My meal was over by 9 p.m.

On the Marwari boy's suggestion, I asked for help in about four-five shops of the vicinity but to no avail. One pot-bellied grocer flung a paisa at me and retorted, "Go to Calcutta or beyond, this is all I can spare for you."

I lost hope of any further gain from the other shops. However, a good-natured lawyer of *Kayasth* caste called Bulakhilal gave me 25 paise and remarked, "These merchants won't

help you; they simply don't value education."

He advised me to approach a feudal lord of Giddhour village Maharaj Ravaneshawarprasad, known to be a generous benefactor. Without much thought I left for Giddhour by the morning train. I got down at Khaira, another princely state at Jamui en route Giddhour. After a walk of seven miles I reached the palatial house only to learn that His majesty doesn't believe in benefaction. At the most one could expect a donation of an anna. Disappointed, I turned back and spent two-three paise on *Poha* and Sweets. I now headed towards Giddhour on foot, a distance of 5 miles. I reached Giddhour at 7 in the evening and camped at a small rest house built by Ravaneshawarprasad for the benefit of travellers. When the care taker (known as *Jamadar*) enquired about my dinner, I replied, "I am too tired to cook my food at this hour. Could you bring me some snacks?" He came back with some sweetmeats in a flash. They were no better than the candies I had at *Bodh Gaya* but hungry that I was I gulped them down with water.

The next day I went to a Pandit's home, supposedly a beneficiary of Maharaj Ravaneshawarprasad's patronage. Going by his decrepit home, I had a good idea of the

magnitude of Ravaneshawarprasad's aid. The Pandit seemed a simple, straightforward fellow. He patiently heard my story and observed, "You have come to a rather strange place. People generally don't lend a helping hand here. Even the king would not spare more than eight annas. He'll provide you with meals for a couple of days and perhaps shell out two-three annas at the time of your farewell. But since you have come from Kashi, maybe you would fetch around 12 annas. But right now he's mourning and would meet you only after four days. I will instruct the *Jamadar* to look after your sustenance at the rest house till such time."

The Pandit's revelation dissuaded me from depending on the Maharaj to sponsor my Calcutta journey. I immediately wrote to my friend Nilkanthbhatji explaining my situation and asked for three rupees, either on his own or from borrowed funds. He sent the amount through money order which I received on the third or fourth day of my arrival in Giddhour. I encashed the money at the post office but kept it under the safe custody of the post master, a *Kayasth* of extremely pleasant disposition. We developed good rapport in a mere two-three days.

Now I didn't need to depend on Ravaneshawarprasad's

sponsorship. But I still deemed it fit to see him once before I left. I met him at the Shiv temple where he was offering prayers on the conclusion of his *Sutak*. As instructed by the kindly Pandit, I handed over the application, written in Sanskrit, to my likely benefactor. In the evening he sent the *Jamadar* with one rupee as endowment. Job done, I quickly headed towards the station to board the night train to Calcutta. On the way I dropped in at the post office to collect the encashed money. The post master asked me to rest for a while as the railway station was quite close to the post office. I declined his offer as the road was unfamiliar to me and it was prudent to leave before dusk. But somehow I lost track of the time in the ensuing conversation. Sensing it was dark I was now in a hurry to leave. He immediately handed over the three rupees and also furnished a rupee's worth of change at my behest. But he forgot to collect the rupee in exchange, and in the mad rush, even I forgot to hand it over to him.

The postmaster was keen to accompany me to the station but I didn't let him take the trouble. He then proposed to send his peon but the latter was nowhere to be seen. I thought of leaving alone as the road seemed broad enough and I hoped to find enough pedestrians for directions. The post master advised, "Go straight down the road. Don't turn left

or right and you'll reach in good time."

I took his leave and walked straight as he had instructed. But after few minutes, the road split in two directions - left and right. There was not a single soul in sight to help me with the navigation. I chose right hoping against hope that it would take me to the station but alas! Even after treading for two-three hours at a stretch there was no station in sight. I wondered: if the station was only two-three miles from the post office, how and where could it have disappeared? The road here was hemmed in by tall grass on both sides and I feared the presence of wild animals that could be lurking in close proximity. I also suspected I would bump into ruthless thugs who would not think twice before depriving me of all my possessions. I walked at a brisk pace in the pitch darkness repeatedly bruised by the countless rough spots on the uneven path. But I didn't stop even for a second.

After a while I saw a flashing light similar to a railway signal. It came from a pole ahead of me but unlike the railway signal, it was white, not red or green. I felt relieved – if not a railway station, this light definitely signalled the presence of some kind of human settlement.

Just then I saw the silhouette of a man some way ahead. He was not visible until he was right next to me. I was absolutely sure this was a thief waiting to raid me in the dark.

Instead, he asked me in a soft voice, "Sir, where are you headed for at this odd hour?"

I asked him sternly, "Why do you wish to know?"

He probably gauged the tone of my question and said, "I am a poor man, but not a thief. It's rare to see a man in this deserted area; hence I was a little surprised."

I narrated my tale as we walked together. Finally, he remarked in a measured tone, "This is an upcoming station between Jhajha and Giddhour. It's not ready as yet; the station master and a peon have arrived only today. It would be operational in another eight-ten days. I'll accompany you to the station. You can spend the night there. Actually I would have taken you to the main town but it's quite some distance from here and you won't feel comfortable in my company."

When we reached the station, I offered him a rupee. Refusing the money, he politely said, "I am poor but I don't wish to be

a burden on you. Offering his salutations, he jumped over the wired fence by the tracks and faded away in the darkness.

Calcutta at last

The station guards did lend me shelter as the poor man had indicated. Next day at dawn I left for Jhajha station, walking parallel to the tracks. The train to Calcutta was due at nine in the morning. I had reached a good one and half hour before. I washed my face and had some snacks while I was waiting. My train reached Howrah at 8 in the evening. Crossing the famous Howrah Bridge across the river Hoogaly, I finally entered the city of Calcutta. As briefed by a passer-by, I boarded a tram that was to take me to the Mahabodhi Sabha but I reached somewhere else. Again boarding the tram, I now got down at Dharamtola Street. After much hassle I found the Mahabodhi Sabha building.

The Mahabodhi Sabha had organised a dinner in honor of an American lady called Miss Albers that night. As I entered the hall, people had just about finished their dinner. A gentleman called Aghorichandra Chatterjee, a high court clerk, greeted me well. He was known to Dharpal who had allowed him to stay in the Mahabodhi Sabha quarters. I was offered a

seat in the adjoining room and Aghoribabu came back with a plateful of Roshogullas and Puris. I eyed the Roshogullas with suspicion for their oval shape and white colour which was similar to eggs. Aghoribabu explained they were made in pure milk. He added further, "You must be unsure of the food on seeing the American lady. Believe me, she's a pure vegetarian, so was the meal served on banana leaves in traditional Indian style." I emptied the plate on his insistence. He also introduced me to the former editor of *Indian Mirror* Narendranath Sen. He cautioned me, "If you wish to go Ceylon you would have to furnish you certificates. Else, we won't be able to help you."

Next day I bought stamps worth one rupee and had them delivered to the post master of Giddhour by ordinary post. I now had only Ceylon on my mind. On Aghoribabu's advice, I decided to board a train till Tuticorin and complete the onward journey by ship. But how was I to arrange the fare, I wondered.

A gentleman called Charuchandra Bose looked after the Mahabodhi Sabha affairs during that time. He was assisted by one Kishtobabu (Like Kushta is the corrupt form of Krishna in Goa; it's Kishto in Bengal.) Charubabu wrote to the *Bhikshu*

from Gaya, on my insistence, seeking his advice on the funding of my Ceylon visit. Meanwhile Charubabu arranged for my food at the Mahabodhi Sabha's expense and appointed an aide called Paddo (corrupt form of Padam) for the purpose. Paddo essentially catered to Dharmpal's needs but in his absence did menial work at the Mahabodhi Sabha. During this time Aghoribabu went home on an eight-day leave.

The *Bodh Gaya* Bikshu's reply came in five days. He had admonished Charubabu in explicit terms, "I don't get any money from Dharmpal for my own overheads. I have to further the *Mutt* affairs on borrowings. How can you expect me to sponsor a student's visit to Ceylon?"

Charubabu broke the news to me and said, "The *Bodh Gaya* Bhikshu has refused help. Even we don't have enough funds at our disposal. At the most we can raise an amount of three rupees for you."

With three rupees, I could travel only till Puri. I thought of completing the onward Puri-Madras journey surviving on alms. Beyond that, if the Madras Mahabodhi Sabha offered help, I would travel till Tuticorin by train. Else I would tread the distance on foot. From Tuticorin, I hoped to somehow raise

enough money for the ship fare till Ceylon.

Charubabu approved of my plan and immediately handed me two recommendation letters: one addressed to the secretary of Madras Mahabodhi Sabha M. Singaravellu and the other to Dharmpal. I gave away my coat and other belongings to Paddo barring a bowl, a pair of *Dhotis* and vests, blanket and turban. I left all my books with Charubabu requesting him to dispatch the books by post if I reached Ceylon as per the plan. If not, the books could be made part of the Mahabodhi Sabha library. Charubabu was at the Mahabodhi Sabha every day from 6 to 8 pm in the evening whereas my train to Puri left at 8 in the morning. Hence I took his leave on the day before the D-day. He instructed Paddo to escort me to the Howrah station.

That very evening, Aghoribabu returned from his native place. Having learnt of my plan, he exclaimed, "It's sheer madness to walk all the way till Madras in this hot summer. I wonder how Charubabu approved of the plan in the first place. It's indeed shameful that you should be deprived of the requisite funds in a prosperous city like Calcutta!" Aghoribabu then narrated my case to Narendranath Sen who was present at the Mahabodhi Sabha at that time, engaged in conversation

with Ms Albers. When Narendranath enquired about the fare till Madras, Aghoribabu replied, "It's about ten rupees. He has already received three from us, now it's a question of seven rupees. Narendrababu remarked, "If that's the case, I'll give him the requisite money. But make sure you buy the ticket yourself and have him board the said train to Madras." Aghoribabu assured him that he would do the needful after confirming the exact fare.

The next day Aghoribabu came back with all the information. The fare till Madras was thirteen rupees and few annas while the fare till Colombo was a few annas short of 22 rupees. He told me, "Even if Narendrababu lends seven rupees, you'll still fall short of three – four rupees. We could instead raise about 25 rupees such that you can directly reach Colombo without halting at Madras. There are many wealthy people among the members of Mahabodhi Sabha and if they don't help us, I'll take you to some of my acquaintances who will definitely help your cause." Aghoribabu then wrote a request letter in English on my behalf with a footnote that I was already in receipt of three rupees from the Mahabodhi Sabha and seven rupees from Narendranath Sen. I went to Dr. Amrutlal Sarkar with the said letter who immediately donated two rupees on the spot. Two Sinhalese merchants put up at the

Mahabodhi Sabha gave me a rupee each. Paddo took me to the residence of Neelkamal Mukharjee, Treasurer, Mahabodhi Sabha who arranged for a whopping twelve rupees but dispatched at the hands of his clerk only the next day. As a result I left Calcutta a day later than scheduled.

Departure to Ceylon

A donation of 25 rupees was raised within no time. Aghoribabu gave me a box of biscuits for my travel. I bundled the box and my books together in a big holdall. I also had Charubabu's letters with me. In the light of the revised plan, I returned the original letter addressed to M. Singaravelu of Madras and secured a fresh one from Charubabu, this one requesting Singaravelu's help only for travel information, not money. I also had Aghoribabu's letter to Dharpal. On March 15, 1902, I reached Howrah station accompanied by Aghoribabu. He bought me a ticket to Colombo and after escorting me to the right compartment, he bade me good bye.

I reached Madras on Sunday, March 16, 1902 at around 11 a.m. While in the train, I had learnt from a co-passenger that people arriving from Calcutta are quarantined at Tuticorin. With just one and half rupees with me, ten days of quarantine would

have obviously made my subsistence difficult. So I decided to stay back at Madras for a day and seek M Singaravelu's help to explore ways of avoiding the quarantine. I located Singaravelu's home with great difficulty. On reading the letter he extended me a warm welcome. After a wash I had lunch at his place. But we communicated only through gestures. I couldn't speak English and he didn't know Hindi. But fortunately his brother spoke Hindi well. He was out on work before but he came home just after our lunch. I explained my situation to his brother who translated my plea for Singaravelu's benefit. I told him I wished to avoid the quarantine altogether but if that was not possible, I sought some monetary help for my subsistence during the said period.

Singaravelu's friend, a gentleman of surname Mudaliyar, was the health officer at Tuticorin. He gave me a letter addressed to Dr. Mudaliyar seeking my exemption from the quarantine. He also assured, through his brother, that in case I could not escape the quarantine, I could intimate him via a telegram such the necessary amount for daily sustenance could be sent across.

The Tuticorin mail left at five in the evening. I had a passenger train ticket but Singaravelu's brother was aware of a particular

provision which permitted passenger ticket holders to board mail trains for long-distance journeys. He told me, "You will find the mail train very convenient. Let's make enquiries at the station right away. If possible you should leave by tonight's train itself."

We both went to the station in a horse cart. Singaravelu's brother, after much effort, found out that I could very well board the mail train since I had a direct ticket to Colombo. He ushered me to my compartment and asked a fellow passenger, someone known to him, to take good care of me. As he took my leave, I thanked him profusely for his timely help.

The train had hardly covered 100-125 miles when I had to suffer an interrogation spree as several ticket collectors probed me - one after another - at different points of time. Almost each one of them would check my ticket; ask me to alight, and make enquiries only to realize in the very end that the Tamil language was as good as Greek or Latin to me. Then they all cried at the top of their voices: *Po Po Po* (which meant 'Go' in Tamil.) Not knowing what they meant, I simply looked around in utter dismay instead of boarding the train. At one station, the station master or his assistant I

am not sure, opened the train door himself, shoved me in, and bolted it behind me. I misplaced my ticket in the process and ultimately found it only on alighting at Tuticorin. When the ticket collector demanded two and a half rupees more, I tried to reason with him but due to the language barrier, we didn't understand a word of what we said. Fortunately I met a Deshasht Brahmin from Tanjavur who could speak passable Marathi. He patiently explained the rules to the station master and convinced him somehow. He said in the end, "These folks are not even aware of the rules and regulations. Had I not been around, he would have needlessly troubled you."

Just as I stepped out of the station, I was stopped by the health officer Dr. Mudaliyar. He asked me about my whereabouts in Tuticorin. I had no idea myself so I simply showed him the letter from Singaravelu. Having read the letter, he seemed convinced and immediately asked his clerk to usher me to an eating joint with the assurance of arranging for my onward journey the next day if possible. This he conveyed through the clerk who knew Hindi.

Dr. Mudaliyar was appointed by the Madras government. He was not the appropriate authority to issue a pass for Ceylon. A European doctor had been appointed by the Ceylon

government for the purpose who issued the pass only after a thorough check following the health clearance by Dr. Mudaliyar. The next day I asked Dr. Mudaliyar's clerk for the pass but he demanded a tip of eight annas in return. I was not ready to offer even one anna. I had to stay back at Tuticorin. The next day I met Dr. Mudaliyar who was extremely surprised to see me. He said something in English which I could not understand. I tried to brief him about my experience with his clerk in Hindi and uttered the words 'Eight Annas' in English somehow. He understood the gist of my story and assigned a new clerk for the job. But it was not possible to secure a pass that day. Ultimately I got the pass on March 20, 1902 and I got ready to leave for Colombo that very evening. The ship was teeming with Tamil coolies but I didn't face much trouble on two counts – there was no cyclone on the way and I didn't eat anything on board. The next day we disembarked at Colombo at ten in the morning.

A meeting with Dharpal at last

I moved up and down Colombo city in search of the address mentioned in the letter to Dharpal and also boarded a couple of trams on the way. Finally I found his house. He lived in a room next to a shop besides his father's house

and was suffering from an acute migraine pain. I showed him both the letters – from Charubabu and Aghoribabu – and tried to explain the purpose of my visit in Hindi. But the letters conveyed my entire story that my speech could never elaborate. He gestured me to freshen up and have my bath. Even the communication with his servant happened only through gestures.

Dharpal's servant placed few buns on the table along with a recently uncapped box of imported butter. Since it was two in the afternoon nothing else was available. I was aware of bread but had never before seen butter of yellow colour which came packed in a box. I mistook it for some sweet of foreign make and emptied nearly half the box. Dharpal's servant would have been taken by surprise for sure but he didn't show the dismay on his face neither did he insult me in any manner. In the evening he promptly placed a beautiful glass bowl, next to the buns, containing a pat of butter. Now I realised my folly and reckoned that this soft stuff was similar to ghee. For my benefit the good fellow spread it evenly on each loaf with the help of a butter knife. From that day onwards I mastered the exact proportion of bread and butter.



12. VIDYODAY VIDYALAYA

In 1505, when the Portuguese general Francis De Almeida arrived on the shores of the Sri Lankan island, it was divided into different regions ruled by as many as seven different kings. In 1517, the Governor General of Goa built a fort in Colombo with the permission of the king of Kotta. That marked the beginning of the Portuguese invasion of the Lankan coastline, inch by inch over a period of 25 to 30 years. It's a well-known fact that the Portuguese, like the Muslims, were religious fanatics. Rather than strengthen their administration in the invaded regions, they went about promoting the Roman Catholic religion by hook or by crook. In Ceylon they passed a rule which stated that issues of those couples who had not entered into wedlock as per the Roman Catholic rituals won't be deemed to be their lawful successors. The sense of revolt against racial discrimination was not as strong among the Sinhalese Buddhists as it was among the Hindu populace of India. The direct consequence of this new law was that many Buddhists conducted their weddings at the Church only to protect the rights of inheritance of their prospective children. More than any other region Colombo thus became

a bastion of Portuguese dominance and consequently the Buddhist *Bhikshus* here were reduced to a thin minority.

During the Portuguese regime if there was any activist after Saint Francis Xavier who toiled and moiled to promote Roman Catholicism in the Sinhalese region it was Father Juje Vaas²¹ who was born in the same village where I was born. After a thorough study of the religion, he left for Ceylon with the single-minded mission to promote Roman Catholicism. He consequently took extra ordinary effort to wipe out Buddhism from the region. Isn't it ironic that in early twentieth century, another individual from his homeland should travel to the same region to study that very religion that he had vowed to wipe out?

The wheels of time indeed move at a bewildering pace. Today followers of the religion, which these saints were opposed to, can be found even in distant Europe. In sharp contrast, the faith for which they dedicated their lives has

²¹ His full name was Joesph Kaitan Vaz. He became a priest at 21 and after eventually moved to Ceylon

few takers even in its homeland of Italy. The state of Roman Catholicism in present-day France and Portugal need not be elaborated. It's for all to see.

In 1658, control over the entire Sinhalese region moved hands from the Portuguese to the Dutch. Unlike the Portuguese, the Dutch were not religious extremists. Instead they entered into peace treaties with the Sinhalese kings and generals for developing trade and commerce. They never promoted any form of Christianity during their regime but the dominance of Roman Catholicism in Colombo remained. In 1797, war broke out in Europe between the Dutch and the English. In one of the consequences, the English forces marched into the Sinhalese region and subsequently invaded it. Later a dispute between the king of Candy Shri Vikramraj Singh and the British led to a fierce battle in 1803. However the English forces had to retreat soon as the difficult mountainous terrain posed severe a challenge to its armies. In 1815, Vikramraj Singh had a squabble with one of his generals. Sending him away on some pretext, the king slayed the general's wife and children. Vikramraj Singh was a foolish tyrant like the last Bajirao in Maratha history. People mutely suffered his atrocities for long but this last insane act angered his generals no end. They discreetly joined hands with the

British and in 1815; they orchestrated the cruel dictator's arrest at the hands of the British forces. The British banished Vikramraj Singh somewhere in Madras province and seized his realm. Thus ended the era of a 2000-year old monarchy in the island state. A heartening development of the new scheme of things was one particular clause under a pact between the British and the Sinhalese, signed on March 2, 1815, which stated that the British forces would not cause harm, in any manner whatsoever, to the native Buddhist faith of the region. Thanks to their trade-centric psyche, the British kept their word by restoring ancient Buddhist *Viharas* and allowing all Buddhist festivities to continue without hindrance. But given the general perception prevalent among the British that Buddhism was a worthless faith rooted in atheism, none of their officers showed any inclination to learn its rudiments.

But incisive scholars like George Turner didn't let this ignorance linger for long. Within 50 years of the British regime, several Pali texts were translated into English which motivated many British administrators to actively promote study and research devoted to this new faith. The pioneering effort of building a rich repository of invaluable information about Buddhism in the English Language, by scholars like Sir Mathukumar Swami, James D Alwis and Revrand Gokhale, was the direct

outcome of this munificent policy.

Sumangalacharya's Vihar

This conducive environment saw the emergence of many Buddhist Vihars. Despite adopting the popular Portuguese surnames like Fernando and Silva, many people now proudly proclaimed their Buddhist identities. Of all the new *Viharas* set up in Colombo, the best was undoubtedly the one in Maligakand incepted by Shri Sumangalacharya, now known as the Vidyoday Vidyalaya. Unlike other Vihars, this one was not set up merely for the worship of the *Buddha* idol and the Peepal tree grown out of the seed of the primordial tree under which he gained enlightenment. It imparted Pali and Sanskrit education to *Bhikshus* and other students. Thanks to the *Vihar's* pioneering effort, the otherwise lethargic *Bhikshus* of the Sinhalese island have taken up higher pursuits of religious learning.

The founder of Vidyoday Vidyalaya Shri Sumangalacharya was born in a village called Hikkaduve near the Galle city. Being the weakest among his siblings, his parents deemed him unfit for a householder's life and moved him to a Buddhist *Vihar* where he was given the *Shramner* (Buddhist

novice) initiation as per the prevalent custom of those times. Such issues were only expected to lead their lives with the calm of a *Bhikshu* and further their sustenance at the *Vihar's* expense. Shri Sumangalacharya proved a sweet exception to this practice. Despite his frail physique and the unavailability of any competent teacher at the *Vihar*, he learnt Pali and Sanskrit on his own initiative. Whenever any scholar from India came to the island, he never missed an opportunity to learn from his insights. He learnt key Pali works like *Vinay* essentially through self-study. Such was his mastery over *Vinay*; he could address any question with indisputable authority. Once while I was with him, one of his prime disciples and a teacher at the Vidyoday College posed an intricate query which Sumangalacharya addressed then and there. He then pointed to a leaf-book on a table and remarked, "Sift through the pages till so and so alphabet." (The leaf book pages were marked by alphabets in lieu of numbers.) When the disciple was done with the read, Sumangalacharya declared, "You'll find the elucidation in so and so line." I was awestruck by his enviable command over the *Vinay*.

Within a few years of Vidyoday Vidyalaya's inception, Colonel Alcott and Madam Blavatsky came to Ceylon to spread the gospel of Theosophy. But Colonel Alcott instead went on to

take initiation in Buddhism from Shri Sumangalacharya and worked day and night for the larger cause of the Sinhalese Buddhists. The scores of primary schools founded by Buddhist people is the outcome of his labour. Later he shifted base from Ceylon and settled in Madras. It was on his instruction that Dharpal, son of the renowned Sinhalese merchant Don Carolis, came to India in 1891 and found a Sabha (council) to restore the fast dilapidating Buddhist temple in *Bodh Gaya*. This was the Mahabodhi Sabha of Calcutta which had extended patronage to me. Sumangalacharya was its president and Dharpal General Secretary. This is not the appropriate space to dissect either the achievements of the Sabha or the effect of its initiatives on Hindus. Having given the above information about the founders I now turn to the main subject.

As mentioned before, Dharpal was down with migraine and hence could not accompany me to the Vidyoday Vidyalaya. He asked a young man called Anvaratna to take me to Acharya Sumangalacharya. Anvaratna read out both the recommendation letters addressed to Dharpal that I had brought along from Calcutta. Then Acharya asked me a few questions in Sanskrit and he seemed happy with my answers. He assured me of taking due care of my day to

day sustenance if I was willing to stay at his *Vihar*. I moved to the Vidyoday Vidyalaya the next day and was given accommodation in one refurbished room behind the *Buddha* Temple. That day I was served food in an earthen bowl in the rear-side veranda of our Acharya's *Pariven* (quarters). I had never eaten from an earthen bowl before and, for a second, I felt miserable at the prospect. But I instantly thought of Lord *Buddha's* rebuke to himself while consuming the *Bhiksha* collected from different homes on his first day in Rajgrih city. I told myself, "If prince Siddharth of a royal lineage could accept the food donated by the lowly people, how can me, a student of the very faith founded by him, feel sickened by the food served by my hosts." I ate the food with dogged determination that day but gradually I got accustomed to eating from the earthen bowl.

The Sinhalese consume *Pej* and make generous use of coconut in every preparation of vegetables just like our Gomantak people. But they garnish their food in a peculiar way. Except rice, *Pej* and sweet items, they sprinkle small pieces of dried fish called *Ambalkada* in almost every preparation. Although the *Vihar* people sorted the daily *Bhiksha* to ensure that I was served pure vegetarian food, I found pieces of *Ambalkada* lurking in my food which I had to

carefully weed out before taking my meal. But sometimes a piece would still find its way to my mouth and I had to spit out the entire mouthful to avoid eating it. During such instances, I was reminded of the following Shloka composed by poet Magh:

*During the time Garuda had made hunters his prey;
he once had to spew a whole morsel because he
inadvertently found a Brahmin in his mouth. Similarly
a camel had to spit out his staple feast of Neem
Leaves to avoid gulping a green mango leaf which was
intertwined with the Neem Leaves.*

With time, I mastered the art of taking out the *Ambalkada* alone without having to sacrifice the whole morsel.

The next day - March 23, 1902 – was the *Uposath* of *Falgun Poornima*. This day is believed to be very auspicious by the Buddhists, like a Sunday is for the Christians or *Ekadashi day* for the Hindus. Of the four *Uposaths* in a month, *Poornima* assumes special significance because it was on this very day that *Buddha* became Lord *Buddha*, it was on this very day that he gave his first instruction in Kashi and it was on the same day that his *Mahaparinirvan* (demise) happened at Kushinara.

Buddhists gather on this day in their Vihars and spend time introspecting on religious matters. That day I learnt from a student speaking broken Sanskrit that the brother of the king of Siam was leading the life of a *Bhikshu* in a nearby *Vihar*. I expressed my desire to meet him and he agreed to take me there in the evening.

The said *Vihar* was not far from the Vidyoday Vidyalaya. We reached in about three minutes. We first met the chief *Sthavir* Vaskuduve Subhuti who was a renowned Pali scholar. He was not well versed in Sanskrit but he understood the gist of my words. He lent me a proofread copy of the *Abhidhanpradipika* and then led us to the quarters of the Siam prince. The prince had excellent command over English and French but had no knowledge whatsoever of both Pali and Sanskrit. He communicated in English with the Ceylon people. The student with me could speak passable English and he translated my Sanskrit for the prince's benefit. Then he translated the prince's reply back to me in his broken Sanskrit. The gist of what he said was this: "The prince was very happy to meet me but deeply regrets the fact that he can't understand Sanskrit. In the next birth, he earnestly hopes to be born in India, in a place like Kashi, and become proficient in Sanskrit to be able to strike a dialogue with me."

Sanskrit lecture

It was dusk by the time we bid goodbye to the prince. When we got back we saw an assembly of people at the Vidyoday *Vihar*. I asked the student about it. He replied, “Today being the *Uposath* day, Shri Dharpal was to address the gathering but it seems his lecture has just concluded.”

Just as we stepped inside the *DharmashaLa*, all eyes fell on me. I could hear whispers and murmurs of *Hindu Pandit, Brahmin from Hindustan*. Just then Dharpal came to me and asked me to address the audience in Sanskrit but I could not comprehend what he told and so the Vidyoday Vidyalaya's second Acharya Shri Devmitra *Sthavir* elucidated Dharpal's request to me. I told them I was not prepared to deliver a lecture but they insisted that I still speak. From the dais, I delivered a small lecture in Sanskrit which the *Sthavir* translated in Sinhalese for the crowd's benefit.

The summary of my speech was this: “The tree under which *Buddha* gained enlightenment was destroyed by the king who hated his religion. But the branch of the same tree which Mahendra (King Ashoka's son) brought to this island

has seen unhindered growth to this day. So is the state of the tree of Buddhism which was sown in India but destroyed by unruly kings and schemers. But a branch of this faith that Mahendra moved to this island is still robust even after the passage of more than 2000 years. I am not a competent authority on Buddhism, I am only a seeker but I am hopeful that I will soon gain a deeper understanding of the faith under the tutelage of a knowledgeable teacher like Shri Sumangalacharya.”

I had no idea of the effect that my address had on the audience who voiced their feelings in native Sinhalese. Then Dharpal rose to speak a few words and Anvaratna moved around the place with his imported hat in his hand. Even as I watched with a mystified expression on my face, people began dropping money into the hat. The collected money was then wrapped in paper and offered to me at the hands of Dharpal. Finding me diffident, Devmitra *Sthavir* remarked, “The people assembled here have contributed these funds for your cause. If you don't accept it, they will feel offended.” I took the money and went up to Shri Sumangalacharya. I contended, “These people have perhaps given me *Dakshina* deeming me to be a Brahmin. But I am in two minds whether to accept it or not.” He replied, “You are a poor student, why

do you hesitate? You can use it to buy books.” I went to my quarters and counted the money. It totalled up to around 2.50 to 3 rupees.

From the very second day of my arrival at the Vidyoday Vidyalaya, I began taking lessons in the Sinhalese script. This became necessary as all the Pali literature had been written or printed in the Sinhalese script. Within a week's time, I learnt the alphabets and consequently I read many Pali books written in Sinhalese script. In March end or the beginning of April, Shri Sumangalacharya was to leave for Galle on some work. He asked me whether I would like to come along and since I was keen to visit the scenic countryside of the island, I agreed instantly.

The Colombo-Galle railway track runs alongside the coastline. We completed the journey during daytime itself. The landscape reminded me of the coastline of the Sasasht province of Goa between Murgaoon and *Ramache Bushir*. We stayed at Galle for two-three days. Here I witnessed a strange natural phenomenon. Like how cashew grows on its own on the mountainous terrain of Goa, palm trees thrived on the Galle soil without the aid of irrigation. I was informed that the bountiful rainfall of the region throughout the year

eliminates the need to water plants like banana and palm trees. From Galle, we went to Acharya's native place near Hikkaduve for a day before returning back to Colombo. During this trip I had the privilege of meeting several *Bhikshu* scholars who gave me proofread published copies of many a Pali work.

May 22, 1902 was a *Vaishakh Poornima* day, a very auspicious day for the Buddhists. On this day, prince Siddharth sat under a Peepal tree on the banks of the river Nairanjara near Gaya and attained enlightenment. The Vidyoday Vidyalaya people swung into action a couple of days in advance to celebrate this momentous day by decorating the whole place with colourful flags. I composed a Sanskrit verse and showed it to Shri Sumangalacharya for his opinion. He liked it very much and the editor of *Sinhal Samay* had it published in Sinhalese script in their newspaper. Thanks to this work in print, I became quite well known and the ones with some familiarity with Sanskrit praised my linguistic skills.

This unwarranted praise and popularity among the Sinhalese people caused my mind to sway. Had I taken up Sanskrit teaching as a profession, I would have easily fetched a job of Rs 60-70 rupees which was enough to help me settle in

some village near Colombo with my family. But that would have put a terminal full stop to my ongoing Pali education as also the plan to return to my homeland.

The *Shramner* initiation

At the time of leaving Pune, I had made two resolutions to myself. One, to achieve as much knowledge of Buddhism as I can till the last breath and two, to use this knowledge, if I indeed do gain it, for the betterment of my native people of Maharashtra. But the lure of settling in Ceylon was a direct threat to both targets. A fierce war of contrasting thoughts ensued on the battlefield of my mind. Not being as exciting as a normal war, I don't wish to cause exhaustion to my readers citing detailed news and updates of this combat. It would suffice to say that in the end the Pune resolutions reigned supreme.

After scaling the peak of Sinhagad, Suryaji had cut off all ladders thereby leaving no option for his troops but to face Aurangzeb's army in combat. I intended to do something similar to nip all contrary thoughts, of settling down as a householder, in the bud. One option was to become a *Bhikshu* which would have eased my stay at the *Vihar* and

given me the space to concentrate on books like *Vinay*. But there were many hurdles to becoming a *Bhikshu*. For one, it called for the approval of the prospective *Bhikshu*'s mother which was impossible to secure in my case. Then I also had to get the consent of the party which sent me to Ceylon in the first place. After much deliberation, Sumangalacharya wrote to Narendranath Sen who readily gave his consent and even complimented my single-minded devotion to my mission. Acharya found some other rule to condone the absence of the mother's approval.

It's not necessary for the seeker of Buddhism to observe celibacy throughout one's lifetime. But during the time one leads the life of a *Bhikshu*, it's mandatory to follow all rules and regulations without fail. The *Shramners* have ten rules of observance (Refer page numbers 65-66 of '*Buddha, Dharma and Sangh*' and page 166 of '*Buddha LeeLa Sar Sangraha*')

Though a *Bhikshu* can't participate in Sangh activities, he is entitled to many conveniences at the *Vihar* apart from help and support in matters of study. After my *Shramner* initiation, I focused only on the study of Pali books. After a few days, many *Bhikshus* came to me with unremitting requests to teach them Sanskrit. As a result I taught them *Kaumudi* and

Tarksangrah for an hour or two in the evenings and devoted the rest of the time for my own learning. Sustenance was never an issue at the *Vihar*. What's more, I got all the books I needed from the *Bhikshus* and other gentlemen. But this seamless arrangement was disturbed by an unforeseen development.

The secretary of Madras Mahabodhi Sabha M Singaravelu came to Ceylon on his return from abroad. He was at Colombo for a day and visited the Vidyoday Vidyalaya to meet our Acharya. This meeting could not take place for some reason but probably he did meet the Acharya's deputy Devmitra *Sthavir*. Singaravelu probably had an English interpreter with him else the conversation would not have been possible. After exchanging pleasantries Acharya Devmitra mentioned my name and perhaps showered praise on me. In response Singaravelu had this to say: "The Brahmins of Hindustan are wily people. Beware of them. This man may look like a simpleton but you can't trust him. Don't forget he's a Brahmin after all." That very day Devmitra *Sthavir* made this feedback public. It didn't change Shri Sumangalacharya's opinion about me but a few people now disbelieved my intentions.

When I sensed this development, I was hardly worried

about my potential distress at the *Vihar*. What pained me deeply was the desperately vindictive conduct of a well-educated Indian like Singaravelu. I was sorely surprised that the gentleman who had been a wonderful host and who eased my travel by forwarding a letter to Dr. Mudaliyar from Tuticorin should have maligned my name among the Sinhalese people merely because I was a Brahmin. Just about that time, another development took place. The renowned Japanese warrior General Pokushima came to Colombo on his way back home from Germany. As soon as he learnt that a few poor Japanese students were studying Pali at our ashram, he rushed to meet them in person. At that time, only one student named Koundinya was at the Vidyalaya. The other four students were settled in different villages on the western coast. Pokushima thanked our Acharya profusely for having taken good care of the Japanese students.

On one end was a literate Indian who held a grudge against me despite knowing me well. On the other was a revered Japanese army official who went out of the way to motivate poor Japanese students he had never met before. The stark difference between the two instances makes it aptly evident how caste differences come in the way of national solidarity for many Indians.

Post Singaravelu's visit, I stopped eating at the *Vihar* and begged for my food instead. Since this was one of the fundamental duties of a *Bhikshu*, our Acharya didn't dissuade me from doing so. The *Bhiksha* was essentially cooked food, more so rice. The *Vihar* provided vegetables, milk and chapattis made of rice (called *Appa*, similar to an item called *PoLe* in Goa).

The staple food of the Sinhalese people is boiled rice which I simply could not digest. It caused me rheumatism and eventually dyspepsia. I was in great distress owing to my ailment. The only solace was my books. There was no facility for physical exercise at the *Vihar* which made matters even worse for me.

Around this time I took to learning English and ordered a book called *Self teacher* from Mumbai for the purpose. Later I shifted to Shrivardhaman Nagar to stay with Suryagod Sumangal *Bhikshu*. I taught him Sanskrit while he taught me English. But this exchange didn't last beyond a week because he had very little time at hand. I continued my English learning with the help of a young student but even that effort concluded within a week. During my brief stay at Shrivardhaman Nagar for about two or three months, I tried

sea bathing for a few days but that had an adverse effect on my health. I also underwent Ayurvedic medication from a *Bhikshu* but with the same result. In the end I decided to leave Ceylon once and for all and move back to Calcutta.



13. MADRAS AND BURMA

Mahavir, a man of *Kshatriya* caste (warrior clan) hailing from Bhojpur in north India, was a benefactor of Shrimant Maharaj Malharrao Gaikwad. He was fond of wrestling and other forms of virile sport, a trait which had endeared him to Malharrao. But when Malharrao was posted to Madras²², Mahavir left Baroda and in the course of his wayward travel in the company of his aide, he reached the shores of Ceylon. He was here for a good 7-8 years and following his affinity with a few *Bhikshus* of the region, he became a *Bhikshu* himself. He ultimately moved to Calcutta and led an ascetic life in a hut.

A Sinhalese trader from Calcutta wrote in his will that a sum of 20 rupees per month be awarded to the occupants of this hut. For many years the accumulated amount stayed in government treasury before it was finally disbursed to Mahavir. Being a *Bhikshu*, he had no use for it himself but he decided to invest it for the welfare of *Bhikshus*. Accordingly

he decided to build a rest house for the benefit of Buddhist travellers in either Bodhgaya or Kashi. But he could not secure the required land in the vicinity of the Buddhist sites at these places. Ultimately he bought a field in Kushinara near the site of Lord *Buddha's Parinirvan* (a village near the Kasaya Taluka of Gorakhpur district.) It was impossible to build the rest house entirely from the funds at Mahavir's disposal. Finally a Burmese merchant from Calcutta named Khejari donated thirteen thousand rupees for the cause. Mahavir *Bhikshu* himself moved to the rest house making it his permanent abode.

I had read the *Yog Sutras* while at Kashi and was curious to find out whether the Buddhist literature had something to offer on the science of Yog. A *Bhikshu* called Priyaratna from Vidyoday Vidyalaya gave me a copy of *Vishuddhi Marg* which he claimed offered a good elucidation of the Yog Shastra. At that time I was not familiar with the Pali script and hence could not grasp the contents. But four-five months down the line, I got hold of a copy of the same work

²² A dignitary of Baroda state, was later removed from office in 1875 on charges of poisoning Resident Colonel Frayer

published in Burmese script. I began reading it only to gain familiarity with the Burmese alphabets but I was soon glued to it. I re-read several of its sections and was now keen to try out the exercises like *Dhyanbhavna* for myself. It was however difficult to find a suitable location, as mentioned in the book, in the Sinhalese island. The island is indeed blessed with natural splendour and there are plenty of scenic monasteries around but the problems of language and food were difficult to counter at these places. One, I wouldn't find food suited to my constitution and two, it was difficult to find a Pali-speaking *Bhikshu* in these remote regions.

A Punjabi disciple of Mahavir *Bhikshu* called Dharmdas came to Ceylon for studying the religion in greater depth. He was fed up of the Sinhalese cuisine on his first day itself. In one of our casual conversations, he mentioned the story of Mahavir *Bhikshu* and the rest house of Kushinara. He also felt that the rest house was ideally suited to the practice of *Vishuddhi Marg* exercises that I had in mind. I decided to go there after a stopover at Calcutta. But fate had other plans for me as this chapter will unfold in the lines to follow.

I informed Shri Sumangalacharya of my plan. He grudgingly gave his consent with a heavy heart. I left Ceylon on March

26, 1903 with nothing but three *Chivars* (Yellow robe worn by *Bhikshus*) and a begging bowl as I had resolved not to keep any money on my person. Dharmpal's father bought me a second class railway ticket to Madras while other friends provided biscuits and other snacks for the journey. I walked all the way from Egmore station in Madras to Singaravelu's home. Now that I knew a bit of English, conversation with Singaravelu was relatively easier. He offered me lunch at his place but squarely refused to buy me a ticket to Calcutta. He remarked, "The Madras Mahabodhi Sabha is penniless. It can't sponsor your travel." He agreed to let me stay with him till I arranged money from Ceylon. But he went back on his word in only a couple of days and proposed to shift me to a new institution in Madras.

The Madras experience

I wrote to several of my friends in Ceylon for help but most of them never bothered to reply. Even if a few did respond, they didn't send me any money. Now I had no option but to abide by Singaravelu's word. He shifted me to a vacant house in the neighbourhood, one owned by a Karnataka Brahmin. My food was also arranged at his place. This Madrasi food killed my appetite and I lost much strength in only a few days.

But all this while, I continued my self-study of English with the help of a dictionary.

Prof. Laxminarsu Naidu was the president of the Madras Mahabodhi Sabha and Singaravelu was the secretary. This Sabha did nothing more than celebrating the *Vaishak Poornima* day on which *Buddha* become Lord *Buddha*. The festivities for the day were sponsored by a wealthy Burmese merchant named Mong Shwe. Many *Parayas* (Sudras or untouchables) had converted to Buddhism in Madras. Their head was Pandit Ayodhidas. Members of the Sabha and Pandit Ayodhidas were at loggerheads for long but post my arrival, a marked unity developed among the Buddhists of different castes within a few months. The culmination of this solidarity was the inception of *Bouddhashram*, a community home set up in a small rented place in Raipet which became my new accommodation. We held discourses and lectures every Sunday evening. I used to pick a Pali sutra and elucidate it in my broken English following which Singaravelu offered his interpretation in Tamil. At times, Prof. Laxminarsu gave a lecture on some theme and occasionally a guest speaker was also invited.

We made great progress in very little time, a heartening

achievement for any instructor of Buddhist faith. Christians and Hindus attended our discourses in large numbers and even orthodox Madras Brahmins sympathized with our cause. However I was restless from within ever longing for the solitude of a secluded place. The Madras food had already made me weak. To make matters worse, I had to sleep on the floor in the *Bouddhashram*. This worsened my rheumatism. The members had proposed to get me a wooden cot but the plan never materialized. I was forced to sleep on a handmade rug despite the damp surface underneath. Singaravelu was essentially an eccentric man. Whenever he was in an angry mood, he blabbered anything that came to his mind. Once in a fit of rage, he yelled, "All *Bhikshus* are good for nothing, no better than Egyptians mummies." Even I shouted back and severely admonished him for treating me like a prisoner. Although this dispute didn't put curtains on our friendship, I resolved to leave Madras as soon as possible.

On the road to Burma

It was pointless to expect help from the Madrasi people as Singaravelu obviously wouldn't have let them help me. It was thus imperative to explore other options. A few Burmese

students known to me were of the opinion that with no other Bikshu for company, it was not advisable for me stay alone in Madras. There were plenty of monasteries in Burma and I would find the environment there conducive to my learning. I enquired through Ayodhidas's son whether they could sponsor my ticket to Burma since I was sure they wouldn't help me if I explicitly asked them to fund my Calcutta trip. As soon as they agreed to raise the ship fare through contributions, I got ready to leave for Burma.

My days in Madras were largely spent like a prisoner. The only solace was the joyous company of Prof. Laxminarsu. He came to the *Bouddhashram* every Friday evening at 5 pm and invariably brought me books to read. He was the first one who taught me the art and science of comparative study. He borrowed books like the *Rigveda* from his college library and shared his own insights that he had developed by virtue of his vast reading. He was a kind-hearted man, free of any addiction or bad habits. Most important, he was frank and honest and certainly one of the leading reformist thinkers from Madras. It was an absolute privilege to know him in person.

I have already mentioned that none of my Ceylon friends

helped me with money. But *Premanand Sthavir* did live up to our friendship by volunteering to send all my books to Madras by parcel. These books were of invaluable help to me throughout my stay in Madras. Traveling with them all the way to Burma was indeed a problem but I still took them along.

Sometime in mid-October 1903, probably on 12th, I left for Burma. Pandit Ayodhidas had come to see me off at the port. He introduced me to a Madrasi gentleman who was travelling by the same ship. Ayodhidas assured me that this man would take good care of me on board. We left the shores of Madras at 2 pm in the afternoon. The third class was jam packed with labourers headed for Madras. They were in a merry mood - humming songs and cracking jokes - despite the suffocating atmosphere of the crammed deck. Hardly had an hour passed that my partner suffered a terrible bout of nausea from the sea sickness. He threw up every now and then and it pained to see him suffer like that. Finally I secured the manager's permission and we shifted to the upper deck. Here he felt much better and we spent the rest of the voyage without further trouble.

We reached Rangoon on the fourth or fifth day. When

we neared the Irawati River, we could see the gleaming dome of the Shwedagon Pagoda. I had heard a lot about this *Stupa* and longed to visit it. But I had to arrange for my accommodation first. After disembarking I don't recollect the exact *Vihar* I went to but most probably it was Vichitra *Sthavir's Ambrukkharam* monastery on Godwin road.

That evening or the next day I met a Burmese scholar called Mrs Hlā Oung. She was the wife of a former accountant general; one of the first Burmese men with a degree in English. Like him his wife was the first Burmese lady well versed in English. The lady was a devout Buddhist and her English education had, most hearteningly, only strengthened her faith in *Buddha* and his teachings. Mr. Hlā Oung was not religious-minded but never came in the way of his wife who was well known for her acts and deeds of benevolence. Among other things, Mrs Hlā Oung founded a school for girls and took special effort to provide religious education to girls of Buddhist families. She cared a lot for the betterment of *Bhikshus*, especially foreigners who had converted to Buddhism. Among the recipients of her munificence were the learned Scotch *Bhikshu* Anand Maitreya settled in Rangoon and the German scholar and researcher Anton Gueth. The latter eventually became a *Bhikshu* assuming the name of

Gyantrilok (Nyantilok in Pali) and settled in a village called Vimidayin near Rangoon, in the Kyundaw Kyaung monastery. Mrs Hlā Oung sent me to this *Vihar* as she felt I would develop good chemistry with Gyantrilok who was resident there as a *Shakbhuk*.

The rainy season was at its fag end albeit the occasional drizzle that drenched the scenic surroundings. Lush green rice crops swayed far and wide adding to the natural splendour of the place. Savouring the wealth of nature from some hilltop was truly a motivating pastime especially for foreigners like me. Monsoon is the time when the benefaction of the Burmese people is at its peak. *Bhikshus* are given donations amidst the cheerful din of musical instruments, their paths festooned with colourful flags. Stupas, *Chaityas*, Buddhist temples and Vihars are renovated during this time which gives a defining glow to every religious monument. I was very happy to witness the festive environment.

But my contentment came with a pinch of salt. I had no regret about having landed at Rangoon instead of *Kushinare* but I was left yearning for a proper diet in Rangoon. The Burmese people, *Bhikshus* included, are hard-core non

vegetarians. The Burmese kings of ancient times had banned the consumption of cow meat but there's no such restriction under the British regime. As a result, beef is more or less staple food for most Burmese. The only non-meat products are rice and condensed milk, hence the only nourishment available to me. I and Gyantrilok had a torrid time managing our sustenance at the *Vihar*. Often we had to collect the shrubs around the *Vihar*, boil them with onions and gulp down the resultant gravy with rice.

The head of Kyundaw Kyaung *Vihar* Acharya Kumar *Sthavir* was quite fond of me. Considering the depth of my Pali knowledge, he didn't deem fit to let me remain a *Shramner* for long since a *Shramner* commands little respect in Burma. Many little children are given *Shramner* initiation but they go home within a few days. Occasionally a few of them come back to become *Shramners* again. Hence the Acharya instructed a Burmese gentleman called Mongashwe to prepare for my *Upasampada* in order to make me a *Bhikshu*. I was in Burma for only two months in the capacity of a *Bhikshu*.

Now let me conclude this chapter with a few lines about my friend Gyantrilok. Born in a virtuous family, he was drawn to religion from an impressionable age. Once he tried to run

away from home to join a church. Later a degree in physics made him a hard-core atheist. He was fond of music and even gained proficiency in music theory and composition post his school years. He could play the violin remarkably well, a skill that immensely helped him in his voyage to Burma. He earned a lot of money by playing the violin at public places in cities like Constantinople, Port Sayed and Mumbai. At Mumbai's Band-stand area, he collected 40 rupees within half an hour. He also had a job offer as a band master at some place in North India. But given his fixation on Buddhism, he refused the offer. He never told me the reason for his inclination towards Buddhism but I presume he turned to religion after reading the books of German philosophers like Schopenhauer.

After coming to Rangoon, Anton Gueth threw away his violin and a boxful of compositions to become a *Shramner* in Kyundaw Kyaung. Thanks to his sharp mind he mastered the Pali script based on a study of grammar alone. I helped him a bit in this endeavour but my help was insignificant before his own effort. He was very protective about me. The Burmese people abuse the Hindustanis by calling them *KaLas* (dark-skinned). He couldn't tolerate if any one called me *KaLa*. At such times, he would admonish the said person in explicit

terms. He would say, “The *Buddha* whom you worship was himself a *KaLa*.”

Once a Burmese at the Shwedagun Chaitya asked in English, “Why did you adopt our religion?” Gyantrilok retorted in a flash, “Buddhism is a *Hindustani* religion, not Burmese. The *Buddha* was born in India and his teachings were promoted and documented in Pali by Hindustanis themselves. So you have no right to call it your religion.”

The ignorant Burmese

The common people of Burma are completely ignorant about the history of Buddhism. I repeatedly told Gyantrilok it was a sheer waste of time arguing with these people on such matters but he continued to indulge in heated debates at the slightest provocation. He openly made fun of their flawed pronunciation. During my *Shramner* phase, I had to receive ten *shikshapads* (sermons) from a *Bhikshu* of our *Vihar*. I requested Gyantrilok not to make fun of the *Bhikshu*'s pronunciation as it could invite the wrath of our chief *Sthavir* besides causing humiliation to the *Bhikshu*. He agreed but when the *Bhikshu* began the *Sharangaman* in his peculiar accent –*Buddyam Thanayam Gisami* – Gyantrilok

burst into laughter. The poor *Bhikshu* was extremely embarrassed. I somehow completed the ritual of those ten sermons and fled indoors. I never bothered to take the *shikshapads* after that instance.



14. PILGRIMAGE TO BUDDHIST SITES

I eventually contracted diarrhoea from the bad food I had at Burma and now thought of moving to *Kushinare*. Gyantrilok seemed fine with the idea but Kumar *Sthavir* was dead against it. The prevalent notion was that a *Bhikshu* should not move his location before completing five years under his Guru's tutelage. But there's no concrete proof to validate this claim in the original *Tripitak* book save for a passing mention of disciples spending five years at the Guru's *Vihar*. And the moot point really is about the study. I contended that since I had made good progress in Pali works like the *Vinay*, the Guru shouldn't be averse to the idea of my shifting to any other place if it gave me piece of mind. But since most *Sthavir* devotees followed the rule of 'Tradition is above wisdom' and since my Acharya was no different, he didn't give me permission to leave for *Kushinare*, at least not whole-heartedly. "You may leave if you so wish" was all he said. Without his consent, no Burmese gentleman would have sponsored my ship fare. A Burmese trader called Mo Shwaho had spent a lot of money for my initiation into the *Vihar* but he would not spare a dime without the *Sthavir*'s

approval. I knew of a few Buddhist merchants of Chittagong. Save for their religion, their lifestyle and traditions are very similar to the Bengali people. I approached them for help and they readily agreed to pay for the third class ship fare.

I reached Calcutta within a few days, loaded with my books and other belongings. I don't remember the exact date but it was some day in early January 1904. During that time, Dharmपाल was on a world tour to places like Japan and America and in his absence the Mahabodhi Sabha affairs had been entrusted to a Sinhalese youth called Anvaratna. He was known to be very careless, I learnt later, but at that time, there was no way I could have fathomed his real nature. My troubles began the moment I stepped into the Sabha. Anvaratna never bothered to look after me but even I was hardly bothered. With my practical knowledge of Hindi, Sanskrit and English, I was ready to travel anywhere in North India and had no qualms either about surviving on beseeched food or over the prospect of occasional starvation. Rather than run after the rich and affluent people

of Calcutta for money, I decided to leave for Mumbai immediately. If I managed to secure a railway ticket on the way, well and good, but I wouldn't wait for that to happen. I had no timelines to follow for any of my departures and arrivals and this I reckoned would be a novel way of gaining familiarity with the customs and ways of life followed across India's different provinces.

I stitched a bag and a large *Chivar* with my own hands and handed over all my books to Anvaratna for safe custody including my diary in which I had chronicled all events since my departure from Goa. I had duly packaged and sealed it before entrusting it to Anvaratna. I had no inkling then that he would still manage to misplace it. (I got back most of my books from Dharpal in 1907)

After a day or two I left Calcutta at the stroke of dawn and found my way to Howrah station. From there I slowly began walking parallel to the Calcutta-Nagpur track. I survived only on the few buns and bananas I had carried with me. I don't remember where I slept that night. I reached Andul station in the morning. Since I now had to make fresh arrangements for food, I ventured into the town. I had learnt from someone, probably from the station master of Andul, that some lawyer

named Sheetalprasad here was known to be a generous man. I found his home around eight in the morning and found him conversing with his clients. When he learnt I was at his door only for food, he probably felt I was kidding. He asked me if I wished some money but I insisted that I only sought a meal before 12 noon as was my wont. He happily agreed and asked me to relax at his place till such time. At 11 am, his servant escorted me to a remarkably clean pond for my bath. Sheetalprasad personally served me a sumptuous Bengali lunch of several vegetable preparations. He again offered me some rupees but I briefed him of my resolve not to carry any money. Thanking him for his hospitality, I proceeded towards the station.

Andul's station master, and his deputy, both were Christian gentlemen but they were extremely cordial with me. I had even interacted with the assistant station master earlier in the morning. I asked him about the possibility of travelling till Midnapore in the guard's cabin. He replied, "If you board a passenger train, you can travel till Midnapore without ticket. People won't bother a Sanyasi like you and we'll brief the guard beforehand." I didn't wish to travel without ticket and again asked about the prospect of travelling with the guard. The assistant briefed his chief about my request. He was

equally sympathetic but he quickly revealed the fact that no guard of a passenger train would ever allow me entry in his compartment. However a goods train was scheduled to leave for Midnapore that afternoon. The station master knew the guard personally and offered to arrange for my travel if I was willing to travel in a goods train. I readily agreed and accordingly completed the said journey. The guard, a Christian, happened to be a kind soul. He sacrificed his own seat to make me comfortable.

At Midnapore station I enquired with a couple of South Indian railway clerks about my onward travel but to no avail. Finally I slowly began treading on the road that led to the town. On my way ahead, I found a car parked by the left side of the road and two-three Bengali gentlemen standing by its side. I confirmed with them about the road to the town and walked on after they replied in the affirmative. Just then one of them caught up with me and asked, “Do you speak Sanskrit?” I replied, “Yes I speak good Sanskrit and I can also converse in English.”

“That car over there belongs to our Rajesaheb. He’s a big proponent of the language and also has a Sanskrit book to his name.”

“I have nothing to do with your Rajesaheb. But if he so wishes, I am ready to converse in Sanskrit with him.”

Just then the Rajesaheb himself walked up to me. He was a Brahmin named Krishnaprasad who owned a big estate in Midnapore besides a sprawling house. (*Kacheri* in Bengali) After a brief exchange in Sanskrit, he offered to take me home in his car. I told him I preferred to walk all the way and he seemed all right with that. Leaving one of his men with me, he sped away in his car. I reached his place at nightfall. He was to leave for his native place the next morning and hence had to attend to some work that night. Without meeting him, I hit the hay in the veranda of his house using my *Chivar* as my bedding. At around 11 pm, I was woken up by some lawyer called Mr. Ghosh who insisted on Rajesaheb’s behalf to eat some snacks. But I told him I didn’t have any food after 12 noon and went back to sleep. The next day Rajesaheb requested me to accompany him to his village but I politely refused telling him that my schedule had been fixed in advance. After instructing his staff to buy me a railway ticket till Nagpur, Rajesaheb took my leave. I had lunch at Mr. Ghosh’s place after which one of Rajesaheb’s acquaintances dropped me at the station. My ticket fare was paid through the contribution of Rajesaheb and his

friends and from the balance money; they bought me some sweets for the journey.

Nagpur-Mumbai Flying visit

I reached Nagpur the next day afternoon. I had consumed the sweets on the way; so I didn't need to bother about the meal for the day. But accommodation surely was a problem. As soon I stepped out of the railway station, I found the city reeling under a severe plague epidemic. People had abandoned their homes in large numbers to escape the clutches of the dreaded disease. It was thus difficult to find shelter at this time. I bumped into two-three grocers of *Baniya* caste (trading community) who deliberated among themselves, "This gentleman looks like an Arya Samajist. No one would welcome him here save for Madhavrao Padhye." One of them told me, "Madhavrao Padhye has camped outside the city. You should approach him, he'll help you out." Taking his advice I made enquiries about Madhavrao's whereabouts and found his tent sometime in the evening. He was outstation in connection with a case and was to return late in the night. His brother threw a flurry of questions at me but I cut him short with my straightforward reply. I told him, "I just wish to meet him and seek shelter for a night. There's

no other purpose." He offered to bring some food but I told him I skipped dinner at night. Saying so, I slept on my *Chivar* bedding in a corner of their tent. Shri Padhye returned that night but refrained from waking me up. The next day he got up late. When we finally met, I told him without reserve that I was a Buddhist. Being a pragmatist, he didn't seem perturbed to hear of my conversion. He remarked, "*Buddha* was after all one of our own ancient Maharishis, Just by following his teachings, I don't think any person becomes a convert. A Japanese Buddhist named Mr. Okakura stayed at my place while he was here. Feel at home in my tent and practice any religious contemplation you may wish to engage in"

I also found it prudent to spend some time in Nagpur. Shri Padhye had a tent erected for my stay and I slept on a bed made of hay. Next to my tent lived a few families which collectively shared the responsibility of my sustenance. Shri Padhye got me an earthen bowl for my food plate. There was a pot for storing water and another vessel for boiling it.

With an earthen pot as my sole treasure and a simple Chivar cloth of no worth to any thief, I will traverse at will to any place without the slightest fear

I experienced this above state described by *Shantidevacharya* in the few days that I was at Nagpur. My tent was quite some distance away from Shri Padhye's tent and the area was prone to snakes, wild animals and thieves. Yet I roamed around in gay abandon and often slept on the wild grass. I spent around a week in this fashion but of course this couldn't have been my permanent abode. It was impossible to stay back once Shri Padhye shifted to his residence as sustenance was a big issue in that dense forest. I decided to go to Benares via Mumbai and eventually move to *Kushinare*. Shri Padhye suggested I travel directly to Benares but I besought, "I was in Pune for a while but I have not yet visited Mumbai. I also wish to spend some time in Umravati which I believe is not far from Nagpur." Shri Padhye didn't press me any further about my travel plans and wrote to his lawyer friend in Umravati Shri Govind Narayan Kane about me. He also bought me a train ticket to Umravati the next day.

I reached Umravati late in the night. I didn't wish to knock on Shri Kane's door at that odd hour so I slept on the waiting room floor at the platform. As a result I suffered a bout of dysentery the next day. He greeted me warmly and introduced me to some of Umravati's revered gentlemen like Shri Dadasaheb

Khaparde²³. On their insistence, I gave a small discourse on '*Buddha's Madhyam Marg*' at the Theosophical Lodge. Shri Khaparde was the presiding speaker and he made a favourable critique on Buddhism on the occasion. My lecture was well received although I was quite apprehensive about it being my first public discourse in Marathi.

Shri Kane took it on himself to make me comfortable. He got me a ticket to Mumbai. Whether he purchased it himself or arranged it through contributions, I would never know. He wrote to solicitor Shri Hari Sitaram Dixit of Mumbai about my visit and also sent a telegram on the day of my travel. He didn't stop at that and said, "If you don't mind, I wish to regularly contribute a fixed amount towards the sustenance of your family." I thanked him for his generosity but assured him, "Please don't worry. My brother-in-law is a doctor and quite capable of supporting his sister."

After spending three-four days in Umravati, I went to Mumbai and after changing trains at Dadar, I alighted at Bandra station. I went to Shri Dixit's home in his chauffeur-driven car that had been parked at the station for me. There was some function at his place or he had invited a few guests, I

²³ His full name was Ganesh Srikrishna Khaparde, renowned lawyer, speaker, social and political activist from Varhad and one of Lokmanya Tilak's prime followers

don't remember clearly but I met many people including Shri Damodar Ganesh Padhye with whom I had a long discussion on *Vedanta*. There was one gentleman called Shri Dabholkar who was unhappy with my conversion and he remarked with great anguish, "The Saraswat clan has lost a gifted individual and vice versa."

Dixit took me to Mumbai the next day and arranged for a private vehicle and an acquaintance to take me on a tour of all prominent tourist spots of the city. Having had my fill, I left for Baroda by the night train. Shri Dixit escorted me to the station at around 11 pm, bought my ticket and ushered me to my compartment. He had already written to his friend Shri Ramchandra Hari Gokhale of Baroda.

Shri Gokhale received me at Baroda station the next morning at the scheduled time. He recognised me by my attire and drove me home in his car. The food arrangements at his place were excellent but I didn't wish to stay more than a day. I left for Ujjaini that very night. Shri Gokhale arranged for my ticket and came to see me off at the station. He offered some money too but I politely refused.

A plague epidemic had stuck Ujjaini at this time. Many of

my old friends like Shri Kelkar had deserted their homes and camped on the outskirts of the town. I don't remember the tent in which I stayed that day; it was either Shri kelkar's or that of the Madhav College principal Shri Dhekne. These people insisted that I seek the blessings of their spiritual Guru named Sheelnath who had camped near Dewas. As a result I covered a distance of 24 miles from Ujjaini to Dewas on foot. But unlike what his literate disciples claimed, I didn't find any halo of piety around his form. The Guru was seated inside a cave atop a hillock and heavy incense smoke fumes engulfed the whole entrance. I went in and promptly squatted before him without offering the customary salutations. The guru and his disciples clearly seemed offended with what they reckoned as my audacity. He gave superficial answers to a few questions I asked him. He was apparently reeling under the influence of *Bhang* (opium). I had already had snacks on the way and also had brought some food along so I didn't have to bother for meals. His disciples worshipped him as if he were a God himself, blowing conch shells, burning incense sticks and chanting his name. I found the spectacle disgusting to say the least. The *Puja* finally concluded at around seven in the evening.

The next day I met a gentleman called Shri Gangadharshastri.

He was the headmaster of the English school at Dewas and genuinely devoted to the larger cause of education. I don't remember the context of our meeting now but I remember dining at his place at around 11.30 am and also delivering a lecture at his school. He made my Dewas trip worthwhile which was otherwise marred by the unpleasant encounter with Sheelnath.

From Dewas I went to Indore as was decided at Ujjaini itself. Shri Ketkar had written to headmaster Kelkar of Indore about me and accordingly I stayed at his place for the day. The next day he bought me a ticket to Ujjaini where Principal Dhekne, Shri Kelkar and other gentlemen together bought me a ticket to Gwalior. At Gwalior, I checked in at Dr. Wagle's place. He was overjoyed with our reunion after four years but was visibly startled to see me in the garbs of a Sanyasi. Nevertheless he was warm and hospitable throughout my stay of two days. He had some work at the royal palace on the day I was to leave for Kashi so he sent his nephew to buy me a ticket at the station. At the time of leaving, the nephew offered me some money on his uncle's behalf but I squarely refused to accept it.

I had heard of a recently set up Buddhist hostel at *Sarnath* in

Kashi. After alighting at the cantonment station, I went to the hostel where a *Shramner* called Sumendhkar arranged for my meal. As the hostel building was yet not fully functional, he regretted I couldn't be given accommodation at that point of time. I asked him, "What's the fare for *Kushinare* and is there any way to secure money for it?" In response, he gave me a rupee and few annas which was the fare for Tahsil Dauriya, the nearest station to *Kushinare*.

I reached Tahsil Dauriya the next morning. *Kushinare* was 23 miles away from here. The road was pretty straight but I was not sure of the availability of food on the way. There was no point waiting at the station either so I hurled myself on the path ahead. It was noon by the time I had covered about 5-6 miles. I checked in at the home of a *Kshatriya* landlord who received me well. After lunch I set off again and spent the night at an ironsmith's place. I arrived at *Kushinare* the next morning. Situated about two miles from Kasaya village in Gorakhpur district, this place is better known as *Matha kuvar ka Kot*. The insane people of this place take great pride in running down *Buddha* idols unaware as they are of the historical context. As mentioned earlier, a Burmese merchant named Khejari had helped Mahavir *Bhikshu* build a rest house here which also became the *Bhikshu's* new abode.

His companion was an old Brahmin who had also become a *Bhikshu*. Besides, Khejari had appointed one Burmese caretaker. Mahavir *Bhikshu* welcomed me warmly and allotted me a room for my lodging. I stayed there for around 15 days but the place was not conducive to my meditation as I faced constant distraction on account of a most bizarre reason. A Raja Ravi Varma painting of Vishwamitra-Menaka was hung on the exterior wall of my room. Curious visitors of the neighbourhood often caused a big nuisance as they laughed aloud every time they passed by this painting. I used to admonish them all the time but every time there was a new bunch of onlookers and hence the ruckus continued. I requested Mahavir *Bhikshu* to remove it from there but he hesitated to do so since it had been placed there by Khejari's man. Left with no recourse, I reversed the painting the other way round but the Burmese caretaker soon restored it to the original state. This miniature painting had caused a big dent in the very purpose of my *Kushinare* stay, that of achieving peace of mind. Now I had no option but to quit this place for good. One day I had a heated argument with Mahavir *Bhikshu* and on that very pretext, I left the rest house.

At the backside of the *Buddha* temple, a wild tree had sprung amidst the ruins of a dilapidated structure. I made some living

space right under it to make it my new home. After shifting to this place, I had to go to the interiors of Kasaya village for my lunch, at a lawyer's home, only on one occasion. From the very next day, Mahavir *Bhikshu* ensured that my share of the *Bhiksha* was delivered to me every day without fail. This solved the question of my sustenance in the makeshift abode.

Two and a half months beneath a tree

I came to *Kushinare* on January 25, 1904. After about two weeks at the rest house, I spent about two-three months beneath the tree. This was my first tryst with secluded and solitary life. It was here that I experienced the fear psychosis elaborated by Gautam *Buddha* in the *Bhaybhairavsutra*. He says, "My dear *Bhikshus*, every Chaturthi, Amavasya, *Poornima* and *Asthmi* day, I wandered to places which are believed to be haunted. During this time, a chill would run down my spine with every sound I heard or sensed - a peacock dropping a dried piece of wood from the tree above, the eerie awareness of an animal on the prowl or even the rustle of leaves swaying to the tune of the midnight breeze. But I consciously overcame every sensation of fear irrespective of my posture at the given time - whether

pacing up and down, while in a sleeping state or in an upright position."

I had the opportunity to follow this lesson and many others mentioned in the *Bhaybhairavsutra* during my stay under the tree. Whenever a mongoose or a wolf crunched the dry leaves of the ground, my heart would skip a beat but I composed myself to annihilate the fear the moment it emerged.

One day I was sleeping, on a carpet provided by Mahavir *Bhikshu*, in the field right underneath the tree. At midnight, as I returned after answering nature's call, I saw a wood-like material at the corner of the carpet. As soon as I snapped my fingers, I saw the snake slowly move away. From that day, I slept on the platform at the front of the *Buddha* Temple. Being at some height, I found it relatively safer. On the flip side, the dew of the wee hours would drench my blanket and the limestone platform would become icy cold.

A Kabir-follower called Murty from the neighbouring village often visited me to discuss matters of religion and spirituality. At times I would elaborate the Buddhist *Bhavana* exercises for his benefit. Once we both spent a night in a graveyard

infested with foxes and wolves. The remains of human bones and body parts made the atmosphere even spookier. I collected several bones like *Narakpal* from the cemetery and meditated on them for a few days.

Woodlands were not new to me. Our native Sankhval is yet circled by a dense forest cover and tiger prowls are heard in the evenings even to this day. I had traversed the dense jungles on many occasions and being alone in a graveyard was no big deal for me either. But way back then, I wore a different militant attitude, invariably armed with a sickle or cane in hand to resist potential attacks from ghosts, spirits, wild animals or thieves. Here at *Kushinare*, I was to fight all demons solely with the weapons of peace and detachment. Even when I sensed a wolf on the prowl, I never prepared to attack it. My stance was that of voluntary surrender. If the animal would be satiated by savouring my body, so be it. The *Kushinare* stint was undoubtedly a unique spiritual experience for me.

In April 1904, when Dharpal returned to Calcutta post his visit to countries like Japan and America, he was obsessed with the idea of founding an industrial school at Kashi. I decided to meet him there following the receipt of a couple

of letters from him. I went to Kashi in the last week of April and spent a couple of weeks under a banyan tree near the *Buddha* temple rest house. The day Dharmpal came to meet me from the town, a *Sarnath* fair was underway. On this occasion, hordes of people had gathered around the *Stupa* built by Emperor Ashok. Dharmpal requested me to explain the historical import of the place to the crowd. I cautioned him that this attempt before a visibly unmindful audience wasn't likely to bear any fruit but he was quite adamant. Finally I stood on the platform next to the *Stupa* and spoke, "You would be unaware of the history of this place. This stupa was erected by Emperor Ashok" Just then, someone from the audience cut me short and retorted in Hindi, "Why you say is blatantly false. We were told this place used to be an oil-presser's trench." I made a feeble attempt to pacify him, "There's no historical evidence to prove that claim. This place is too narrow for that." Now it was the turn of another person to vehemently oppose me, "You mean to say you are right and our forefathers were wrong. This was indeed a trench and the oil-presser often jumped into it." That was the end of my discourse. The crowd had a hearty laugh to celebrate my supposed defeat.

One sensible gentleman, a retired engineer, stepped

forward and told Dharmpal, "It's futile to brief these people on ancient history. You have travelled the world over. Share your experiences of people and the industrial developments in the countries you have visited." When Dharmpal conveyed his consent, this man introduced Dharmpal to the audience and later translated his speech in Hindi. The discourse hardly seemed to have the intended effect on the crowd but that they heard it patiently in itself was no mean achievement.

I was aggrieved to find such disdainful ignorance among the people of a nation which was the birthplace of Buddhism and which promoted it far and wide to countries like China. Leave alone Buddhism, the people of Kashi-*Kushinara* lag behind in every sphere as compared to the people of regions like Maharashtra and Bengal. Save for the few Pandits in Kashi town, the people of the adjoining regions are still trapped in a cesspool of illiteracy and regression. I am not aware if things have changed for the better but way back then, the situation was pretty bleak. Even principle towns were deprived of primary schools, illiteracy was rampant even among the Brahmins and being able to effect one's signature was considered a phenomenal feat. Which loyal countryman would not feel dejected to find the sorry state of affairs in this central province which was the leading light of

progression in the olden times?

There was a *Jain* temple next to the banyan tree under which I had sought shelter. During the night, I slept in the cloister of the temple. The priest lived in a rest house nearby. One person from the neighbouring village had been appointed by the Archaeological survey on a monthly salary of about four rupees to guard the rocks and stones of the place. He often advised me to stay at the rest house as he claimed ghosts and spirits invaded the temple area at nightfall. Needless to say, I didn't leave the place.

North India summers are extremely severe. One afternoon, I was relaxing under the Banyan tree when I spotted a labourer carrying a pot of water. He was employed for excavation work in an area adjacent to the temple. I requested him to pour some water in my *KamandaLu* (oblong water pot) but he politely refused. I presumed he feared the wrath of his co-workers waiting at the site and hence I remarked, "Don't attend to my request if it would spell trouble for you." He kept his pot down and pleaded, "Don't get me wrong sir, actually I am an untouchable of cobbler caste, how can I serve water to a Brahmin like you? That would be sinful." I replied, "Even Rohidas was a cobbler but he commanded respect from

people of all strata. I don't believe in caste discrimination. What I seek is some water, nothing else." But he refused to budge from his earlier position. He submitted meekly, "If you think I have erred in some way, behead me but don't force me to commit this sin."

Finally I gave up and walked till the *Jain* temple well in the scorching heat to fetch a pale of water. This incident bore testimony to the contrasting social position of backward communities in western countries as compared to Hindustan. In the former case, the poor and downtrodden are conscious of the fact that they are victims of a flawed social structure and that annihilation of this man-made prejudice will automatically lead them towards a better life of equal opportunities. But back home, our backward communities genuinely believe in the caste theory and don't think twice before dismissing those very people who care for their upliftment. Unless education is made compulsory, there's no point in expecting them to get rid of the dogmatic beliefs which are ingrained in their psyche and passed on from generation to generation.

After about two weeks under the banyan tree, I moved to a room in Dharpal's bungalow in the Kashi cantonment. I

spent two weeks here and following Dharmpal's instructions, I went to *Bodh Gaya* where the caretaker M P Sumangal had been expelled to some other place after Dharmpal became apprehensive about his personal affairs. The new caretaker, a young Sinhalese *Bhikshu*, took good care of me. Dharmpal sent him a fixed amount of money every month and the young *Bhikshu* managed all affairs single-handedly. Every day after lunch, I sat beneath a tree on the beach of river Nairanjara and practiced meditation in accordance with the rituals mentioned in Buddhist religious literature. It won't be out of place to briefly cite the history of this place. During his Bodhisattva²⁴ phase, Lord *Buddha* performed severe austerities for about six years in and around *Bodh Gaya*. He starved, went on a meagre diet of green gram and horse gram extract, did every penance possible but to no avail. As a result he no longer believed in trying to attain salvation through physical rigors and began consuming food. The five disciples who were with him, his ardent followers, were not happy with the Guru's changed ways. They concluded that he was a fake and went back to Varanasi. But the Lord continued his penance without compromising on the bodily needs of food and water. On the night of *Vaishakh Poornima*, he sat in deep

²⁴ 'Bodhi' means knowledge of human ascension, and one who strives to attain this knowledge is the Bodhisattva, this adjective was used to address Lord Buddha till his enlightenment

contemplation under a Peepal tree²⁵ etched to the *Bodh Gaya* temple after consuming Kheer offered by a *Kshatriya* girl called Sujata. That very night paved the way for the dawn of his enlightenment. From Bodhisattva, he became the *Buddha* – the all-knowing one. But the place gained in prominence only after his *Parinirvan*. Several kings and wealthy men built temples, stupas and viharas in the vicinity but barring the main temple, all the structures were eventually demolished and now lie buried deep under the earth's crust. King Mahanama of the Sinhalese island built a grand *Vihar* with gold-plated and jewel-studded interiors in 5th century, so it is believed. Even today tourists are shown the supposed site but save for huge mounds of mud, there's nothing to bear testimony.

Neglect of *Bodh Gaya* temple

The state of the main temple was no better during this time. The encroaching roots of banyan trees had damaged part of the temple roof and the structure was in a dilapidated state. But in the winter of 1876, the Burmese king Mindon Min sent a delegation of three officials who duly commenced major repair work of the temple with the consent of the presiding *Mahant*.

²⁵ This tree was believed to have been uprooted by a tyrant king but a sapling of the same tree now stands on the same spot

But the British Government objected to this development since it feared that the Burmese king would make drastic changes to the original structure. After a lot of correspondence, a contract was signed between the two parties which held that the British Government would conduct the repairs and the Burmese king would provide the funds. An English engineer was appointed to supervise the renovation. The British Government also commissioned Dr. Rajendralal Mitra to publish an informative booklet on *Bodh Gaya* besides nominating a custodian for the maintenance of idols and other artefacts.

King Mindon Min built a small rest house at the place and posted two-three Burmese *Bhikshus* for supervision. He also donated loads of ornate utensils for worship and other rituals. The plot on which the rest house was built was also under the ownership of the *Mahant* but his relations with the Burmese *Bhikshus* were quite amicable. But in January 1886, when the English Government dethroned King Mindon Min and attached Burma to the territory of Hindustan, the *Bodh Gaya Bhikshus* had to return to Burma and all the lavish and bejewelled utensils now came in the possession of the *Mahant*. He suddenly realized the worth of this seemingly deserted temple and was now desperate to gain absolute

control over the place.

In 1891, Dharpal left Ceylon on a tour of Buddhist sites in the company of Colonel Alcott. He was extremely saddened by the plight of the Gaya temple. The unkempt courtyard was now reduced to a jungle and worse, the villagers used the place for defecation and morning ablutions. The temple had become a playground for urchins who pelted stones and damaged the interiors. The watchman appointed by the *Mahant* hardly took any notice. He only kept an eye on the prized offerings that travellers placed before the *Buddha* idol.

Dharpal returned to Ceylon with the resolve to restore the lost glory of this pious site. He founded a special institution for this purpose which came to be known as the Mahabodhi Sabha. In 1893, he attended a seminar in the American city of Chicago as the Mahabodhi Sabha secretary which made him a popular figure in the international circuit. On his way back, he bought a vintage *Buddha* idol from an ancient temple in Japan. He wished to establish it on the upper floor of the *Bodh Gaya* temple but the *Mahant* vehemently opposed him. The idol lay idle in Gaya for more than a year after which Dharpal decided to take matters in his own hands. He went to *Bodh Gaya* with a couple of *Bhikshus*,

erected the idol on the upper floor, and began the inaugural worship. When the *Mahant* learnt of this development, he sent his disciples who caused a big ruckus and threw the idol in the temple courtyard. The news spread like wildfire through Gaya and the Magistrate Mr. MacPherson had to summon police protection for Dharpal and the *Buddha* idol.

Litigation for the sake of religion

In the hullabaloo that followed, a few of Dharpal's friends advised him to file a case against the *Mahant*. But Shri Sumangalacharya, my guru and president of Mahabodhi Sabha, was against taking the matter to court. A Sinhalese barrister from Ceylon was sent for investigation and even he advised against litigation. But Dharpal yet went ahead and filed a case against the *Mahant*, probably under the influence of his English and *Hindustani* friends. In his defence, the well-off *Mahant* employed the renowned barrister Manmohan Ghosh from Calcutta to fight his case. But Mr. MacPherson gave his verdict in favour of Dharpal and reprimanded four disciples of the *Mahant*. In response the *Mahant* appealed to the D. Judge who upheld the original verdict but made slight changes to it. Manmohan Ghosh then moved the case to Calcutta High Court and initiated a negative propaganda

through local and English newspapers. He alleged that the verdicts passed by the *Bodh Gaya* Magistrate and the D. Judge were a vehement attack on the Hindu religion. As it is, the common people of Hindustan had queer ideas about Buddhism. Hence an Anti-Dharpal wave gained ground within no time. Meanwhile the case came for hearing before Justice Banerjee and the Chief Justice. They upheld the age-old Buddhist tradition of worship in the *Bodh Gaya* temple but reversed the verdict passed by the lower courts by disallowing the establishment of any new idols unless approved by the *Mahant*. As a result, the *Mahant's* disciples were deemed innocent and escaped all punishment.

Dharpal had to shell out a lot of money for this case. Mahabodhi Sabha funds to the tune of 40,000 rupees went down the drain. As a result, distraught Buddhists from Ceylon and other places stopped further aid to the Mahabodhi Sabha. Dharpal still had the support of the Burmese people who helped him with funds even after the court debacle. On the other side, the *Mahant* became even more vindictive. He had earlier signed a contract approving the allotment of a plot to Dharpal for a proposed rest house. But he went back on his word and didn't register the said contract.

It would not be out of place to briefly describe how the Shaviate *Mahant* gained control of a Buddhist temple in the first place. Prior to Emperor Shahjahan's reign, a Shaviate Sanyasi from Punjab called Giri lived on the banks of river near the *Bodh Gaya* temple. The region was then totally uninhabited, home to wild animals and reptiles. The Sanyasi gained name and fame with time and many people from the neighbouring villages became his disciples. One of them was a member of Emperor Shahjahan's court. Thanks to his influence, the Sanyasi was awarded two villages close to the *Bodh Gaya* temple. From that time, Giri's chief disciple came to be known as the *Mahant*. He eventually built a *Mutt* from the remains of rundown structures near the *Bodh Gaya* temple. For the said construction, he uprooted many of the Ashokan carved columns and also had several *Buddha* idols etched to the *Mutt* walls facing backwards. Later the *Mahant* was forced to reinstate the Ashokan pillars to the original position, thanks to an act passed by Lord Curzon for the preservation of archaeological artefacts. However several *Buddha* and Bodhisatva idols were lost forever.

Now in absolute control of the *Bodh Gaya* temple, the *Mahant* became highly wary of any interaction with Buddhist monks. The government on the other hand shied away from any

concrete step to help resolve the conflict. Although monks yet continued their worship, the *Mahant* had a *Tripund* smeared on the forehead of the *Buddha* idol thereby proclaiming the *Buddha* as the ninth Vishnu avtaar. He also appointed a Brahmin to conduct *Puja* according to Hindu rituals. Through this ploy he only wished to deny entry to the monks but the government didn't let this happen. But the *Tripund* remained on the forehead which pained the monks no end as the *Buddha*, a Sanyasi, didn't believe in such sacraments. Now the *Mahant* has demanded the custody of the Burmese rest house while Dharmopal regularly accuses the government of deceitfully siding with the *Mahant*. In short the tranquility that pervaded the site during *Buddha*'s time is now part of history, lost in the tug of war between the *Mahant* and the monks even as the government chooses to watch the duel from the sidelines.

I met the *Mahant* on one or two occasions. He was cordial with me and assured me of regular provisions towards my sustenance. I thanked him for the generosity but made a counter request, "I don't need your help for my sake. Can you do something for the upliftment of the backward communities of this region? The aids you receive from kings and other dignitaries are not for aimless benefaction, it's to

promote knowledge among common people. In Japan, Buddhist monks are taking exceptional pains to serve the larger cause of education. In fact a Buddhist leader called Singanji has sent his son abroad for higher studies. In contrast, your disciples do nothing more than abandoning their homes or working on the fields. There's not a single school in the neighbourhood. Little children fall at the feet of foreign tourists begging for alms. Isn't this a matter of shame for us?"

The *Mahant* didn't seem miffed with my candid submission. Instead, he empathized with my plea and promised help for opening a school. A month passed since but there was no word from the *Mahant*. I requested the government custodian called Shri Bose to remind the *Mahant* of his promise. He came back and conveyed the *Mahant's* message as follows: "The *Mahant* doesn't deem fit to open a school in this region. If people become literate, they would shy away from physical labour. The *Mahant* would then have to source people from outside to plough his fields."

Not losing hope, I took the lead. Together with the Sinhalese monk, I decided to save some money for the school by exercising thrift. I also asked Dharmopal for some extra funds. We offered to pay five rupees per month to a local tutor

for imparting free lessons to the community and he readily agreed. But the parents of the children weren't even ready to pay for the textbooks and slates. I had to send the Sinhalese monk to Gaya to buy the needful.

When the *Mahant* learnt of our initiative, he thought of an ingenious way to abort our plans. The tutor's brother worked as a clerk in the *Mahant's* office. The *Mahant* threatened to sack him if the tutor dared to take our offer. The terrified tutor backed out and we eventually distributed the books to the kids of his own school.

A stag was hit by an arrow. He resolutely uprooted it and sped for his life deep into the jungle. But the blood from his wound oozed along the way and the hunter tracked him down following the bleeding trail. The stag sighed before breathing his last, "Alas! The blood that nourished me all my life has now triggered my demise." One can't help but voice a similar lament in the context of our modern-day Sanyasis, our so-called guardians of faith. In days of yore, the Sanyasis were the sole reservoirs of knowledge in the absence of printed literature. Free of the bondage of marital life, they travelled far and wide to gain knowledge and also promote it in the larger interests of the community. The travelogues

of Chinese explorers like Hsuan-Tsang and Hein Fa-hien bear testimony. But today the Sanyasis themselves stand in the way of our progress and, to an extent, are also responsible for our despondency.

I didn't wish to stay any more at the *Bodh Gaya* temple in such a hostile environment. But I couldn't shift immediately because it was the time of *Chaturmas* (holy period of four months marked for austerities) I spent most of my time reading the *Tripitak* published in Siamese script. In the evenings I invariably meditated on the banks of river Nairanjara. As soon as the *Chaturmas* ended, I left for Rajgrih accompanied by the Sinhalese monk and Anvaratna. This place is 16 miles from Tillaiyya station on East India railway. During *Buddha's* time, Rajgrih was the capital of Magadh province. Surrounded by the hillocks of Gridhrakut, Pandav and Vaibhar, this place is also known for a hot water stream called Tapoda during *Buddha's* time. Some distance away from Tapoda is the Saptaparni cave where Mahakashyap *Sthavir* addressed a gathering of 500 monks after the *Parinirvan* of Lord *Buddha*. King Ajatshatru had built a huge pandal for this meeting, so it is believed. After *Buddha's Parinirvan*, Rajgrih lost all its prominence and when the Nandas moved their capital to Patiliputra, it was abandoned for good. It wears a deserted

look to this day. A Sanyasi of some clan has built a *Mutt* nearby but unlike the *Mahant* of *Bodh Gaya*, he has nothing to do with the Buddhist site of Rajgrih. The Hindu Brahmins of the place falsely claim that the erstwhile palace of the Magadh king was actually Jarasandh's bastion. Some similar story has been woven around the hot stream too, all this to take unsuspecting tourists for a ride and make money in the process. But this derelict place is not a tourist attraction in the league of Gaya. We spent a day here and returned to *Bodh Gaya*. From there, I and the Sinhalese monk went to *Kushinare*.

A month at *Kushinare*

As winter was about to set in, I built a small *Chivar* tent near the place I had camped before and now slept on a wooden cot. The commotion of *Bodh Gaya* had caused much harm to my meditation and hence I decided to spend the next 7-8 months in complete isolation. A young Burmese monk called Chandramuni was at *Kushinare* during that time. Khejari had spent a lot of money to help him in his Sanskrit and Hindi learning and he was also the prospective successor of Mahavir *Bhikshu* as the caretaker of the *Kushinare* rest house. He advised me to move to the Sagai Mountain near

Mandalay which he reckoned was an ideal place for solitary contemplation and hence the first choice of many a monk. I took his word and decided to travel to Burma again. But I had to spend a month at *Kushinare* before that.

Kushinare is believed to be a land of pilfers. Mahavir *Bhikshu* had once been brutally attacked by robbers and deprived of 1500 rupees while he was on the way to *Kushinare* from Tahsil Dauriya. His silk *Chivar* went missing from his hut in a separate incident. There had also been a case of burglary when some expensive garments, an endowment from the Cambodian prince, were removed from the *Buddha* temple. After about five-six months the police found the clothes buried in a field.

Despite their sticky fingers and their seething hatred for Buddhist monks, these people had the utmost respect for me. I left my *Chivar* and begging bowl wherever I fancied and yet they never touched it. On my return to *Kushinare*, some of them even served me hearty meals in their homes. I was left wondering about this special treatment being meted out to me. On one occasion a bloke picked up my hand towel which I had unknowingly dropped on my way back home. He took it to his mother but when the neighbours came to

know of it, they cursed the poor lady for having committed an unpardonable crime of pilfering my belongings. Carrying the towel, she rushed to my place in the hot sun and pleaded before me, “My son accidentally picked this up. Please forgive us. The villagers have accused me of theft without reason.” I gave her the towel back and requested her neighbours not to pester the old lady and her son. Just then a villager asked me, “How do you manage to live alone in this haunted jungle cursed by evil gods? We can’t even dare to pass by this place after sunset.” I told him, “These gods can bring me no harm. If ever they were to do anything, they would only protect me.”

The incident offered me a clue. I vaguely sensed that their respect for me could have been rooted in fear. Further probe proved me right.

The villagers had approached an exorcist to drive away the supposed evil spirits of the hamlet. He carried a bagful of raw rice, supposedly made divine through sacred utterances, and perched himself on a wooden cot. Four people carried the cot to every place which was believed to be haunted even as the witch doctor sprinkled rice from above. But when they reached my location, the exorcist fell

off his cot. He concluded that while all other evil spirits had been slayed, the ones guarding my place were invincible. He also added that the person inhabiting this place must be blessed with supernatural powers. And if any one tries to bring harm to such a person or dares to pilfer his belongings, the entire village will invite the wrath of the evil spirits within a day in the form of fatal diseases. Now I knew why these people were so cordial with me and why they treated me like a demi god.

The ageing monk, Mahavir *Bhikshu's* companion, had almost turned blind with cataract in both of his eyes. I took him to a doctor in Kasaya who advised me to immediately move him to Gorakhpur for the cataract operation.

We both went to the Government hospital in Gorakhpur along with a helper boy. Unfortunately the regular doctor was away and another civil surgeon had assumed charge for the day. I have mentioned earlier about the sorry state of hospitals in Uttar Pradesh. This hospital was no exception. The ignorant people of this region made matters even worse. Patients are foolishly finicky about the food they eat. As a result they had set up their own kitchens in the cramped vicinity of each ward.

The doctor performed the cataract operation right away but in most unprofessional manner. I watched helplessly from the sidelines, so did the poor assistant surgeon who could not muster the courage to confront his superior. I eventually developed a good rapport with him and occasionally dined at his home.

Leaving the young boy to look after the old monk and requesting the assistant surgeon to take good care of the patient, I proceeded on my voyage to Buddhist sites like Shravasti. I had stamps worth one and half rupees with me as also a train ticket to Balrampur.

I reach Balrampur the next morning. This place was ruled by a rajah who earned annual revenues of around 60-70 lakhs. I didn't seek any donation but I hoped he would lend me shelter for the night as was the tradition of those times. When I reached his palace, the guards didn't even allow me to step in. Finally the son of the royal priest took pity on me and took me home for lunch. After the meal, I took the road to Shravasti (now known as *Sarhat Marhat*) which is at a distance of about 10 miles from Balrampur. I reached there at about five in the evening. There was not a trace of humanity around even as I found myself in the midst of a dense jungle.

The location is however most scenic with the Achirvati river (now known as *Ravati*) curving close by. One can also visit the *Anaathpidik's* vihar here. Recently the archaeological survey has excavated several rock inscriptions, idols and other articles from the ruins of this place which have been moved to the Calcutta museum.

I spent that night in a neighbouring village. The next morning, after my meal at a Brahmin's place, I got myself a train ticket to Uskabazar in exchange of a few stamp tickets. *Buddha's* birthplace is about 26 miles from this place which is situated on the cusp of the Nepalese border. I alighted at the station in the morning and went straight to the station master's cabin. My Burmese boots were causing me more inconvenience than comfort and hence I requested the station master to let me deposit them at his office till my return. He gladly agreed and said, "Could you wait for a while till I complete some pressing work. I am keen to know where you are headed and where have you come from?" I nodded and waited on the bench outside his room while he attended to his work. After a while he came back and lent an ear to my story which I narrated in brief. After some contemplation, he observed, "I learn from some Burmese travellers who were here recently that *Buddha's* hometown is quite far from here and it's

impossible to tread the distance on foot. I reckon there's a goods train running on a newly laid track to Sohratganj. Our store keeper would know of the exact timings. I suggest you board that train. At Sohratganj, there's *Kshatriya* landlord called Soharsingh who is sensitive to the needs of travellers. If you mention my name, he'll make all arrangements for your journey to the Nepalese Terai. (The region at the foothills of Himalayas, awarded to Nepal by the British government, is known as Terai)

The station master introduced me to the store keeper who happened to be a kind soul. Not only did he agree to usher me to the goods train, he also arranged for my meal at his place. I boarded the goods train in the afternoon and reached at around 5 pm at Sohratganj. Soharsingh greeted me warmly and showed me a few books on Buddhism that Burmese travellers had gifted him. He arranged for my accommodation for the night at a Brahmin's place. Panditji knew a bit of Sanskrit but he didn't dare to test my knowledge when he learnt that I was in Kashi for my learning. Besides I was his guest at the behest of his patron. He had to be at his reverential best in his own interest. The next morning he served me a meal of *Pakki Rasoi*. I could have done with *Kachchi Rasoi* but he probably wished to leave no stone unturned

in playing the perfect host. (Milk, Puris and vegetables not doused in gram flour is known as *Pakki Rasoi* in North India. Rice or any rice preparation is called *Kachchi Rasoi* which is considered inappropriate for a pious man.)

Kapilvastu-Lumbinidevi journey

I left for Kapilvastu immediately after lunch. Soharsingh wanted me to stay back for a few more days but when I told him about the old monk waiting for me at the Gorakhpur hospital, he didn't press me any further. To make my travel in the difficult Terai region as comfortable as possible, he assigned a barber to act as my escort and handed him some provisions and a rupee for the conveyance. Kapilvastu was about seven miles away, a deserted place of dense forest cover. Close to this forest is a village called Nigilva where Emperor Ashok had mounted a rock pillar in memory of the Konagaman *Buddha*. The locals call this pillar Nigali and hence the village is known as Nigilva.

The Nepal border is only two miles from Sohratganj and five miles ahead of the border is the Nigilva village but the difficult pathway has made this region almost inaccessible. We had to walk on the narrow field bunds that marked the boundaries

of tilled fields. At some places the bunds had given away and we had to find our way through murky cesspools. We had left Sohratganj early in the morning but reached Nigilva only at dusk. The locals refused to let us in at the sight of my yellow *Chivar* garbs. Finally the barber pleaded, "Please don't interact with these people. While I do the needful, please wait on the road."

I had no option but to abide by the barber's plea. At one house, he introduced us as the guests of Soharsingh and it did the trick. Soharsingh was a revered figure here, owner of plentiful land even in the Terai region, and his word was their command. The owner of the house welcomed me warmly. When I quizzed him about the sudden change of heart, he revealed, "We were quite alarmed by your queer attire and feared that if we lend you shelter, we could invite trouble from the Nepalese government. But when we heard the name of Soharsingh our suspicions vanished. His name carries weight even among our government officials."

I found their logic a little exaggerated but the moot point is the complete lack of literacy in this part of the world. And unlike their counterparts in North Hindustan, they don't even believe in traditional virtues of hospitality or benevolence. My

aide, the barber, was apparently one among them but even he was extremely suspicious of their motives. The name of Soharsingh was virtually our password throughout the travel. Thanks to him, we would check in at any home unwarranted and at any hour and all our arrangements were made within no time.

Lumbinidevi lies to the east of Nigilva, about 14 miles away. We spent the night at a peasant's place and left for *Lumbinidevi* early morning. *Lumbinidevi* is two miles to the south of Gautam *Buddha's* birthplace. We went to the site first, mentioned in Buddhist literature as the Lumbinivan. A wasteland of ruins, this place is now reminisced only for the Ashokan pillar inscription. The Ashokan engraving reads, "Lord *Buddha* was born at this place and hence I have personally erected this pillar after due worship." This pillar was excavated by the Archaeological survey only a few years back from the rubble of this place. The top portion is completely damaged, only the eight-ten feet lower half lies desolate in a trench. As I jumped down to have a closer look, I could not control the tears which flowed incessantly from my eyes. The poor barber stared at me in sheer bewilderment. I sat there motionless for about five-ten minutes. I was overwhelmed by the unforgettable sight

despite the elusive gloom that seemed to pervade the environs. But my bliss was destined to be short-lived.

I went to the *Lumbinidevi* temple which houses an idol of Mayadevi found from the debris around. I have no idea who built this temple but I learnt that a Tibetan Lama from Nepal province stayed here for long. His inscriptions on the temple walls are legible to this day. The idol is partly disfigured but it's evident that the sculptor wished to depict the legend of *Buddha's* birth. Engraved in the idol is a picture of Lord Brahma descending from the heavens above to assume the infant's form. The locals have inaptly renamed this place as *Lumbinidevi* but nothing can be more heart-breaking than the fact that animal sacrifice is regularly performed here, right in front of the idol of a pious mother of one of Hindustan's most noble souls who cared for the welfare of all living beings. The Nepalese government has only encouraged the callous practice. The pool of blood outside the temple filled me with such anguish that can never be described in words. There was little I could do to stop the inhumanity, hence I somehow consoled my grieving mind and, after a final glance at the divine place, left for the *Lumbinidevi* village.

I don't recollect where we stayed for the night and where

we stopped for food as the gruesome scene outside the Mayadevi temple danced before my eyes again and again throughout the remainder of my journey. But I do remember treading the distance from Bhagvanpur to Uskabazar on foot. I had already handed over the required stamps tickets to the station master in exchange for the train fare to Gorakhpur. Throughout the journey, we didn't need any of the provisions or even the rupee lent by Soharsingh. I gratefully handed over the same to the barber and took his leave.

Back at Gorakhpur the old monk's eye had been damaged beyond cure. He didn't just hold the doctor responsible for the mishap, he even blamed me squarely. But nothing could be done to restore his lost vision. I came back to *Kushinare* and after seeing him off at the rest house, I now looked forward to the Burma visit.

That year I travelled to different places and got acquainted with different people but I have titled this section "Pilgrimage to Buddhist sites" only because I chiefly covered Buddhist landmarks like *Kushinare*, *Bodh Gaya*, Rajgrih, Shravasti, Kapilvastu and Lumbinivan. Among these, Buddhist followers consider four to be extremely sacred viz *Buddha's* birthplace *Lumbinidevi*, the spot of his enlightenment *Bodh Gaya*, the

venue of his first instruction *Sarnath* and the place of his *Parinirvan Kushinare*. (*Mahaparinimbann Sutta*)



15. BURMA AGAIN

Chandramuni had arranged for the funds to sponsor my Burma visit through a correspondence with Khejari in advance. The Sinhalese monk from *Kushinare* was also with me since he too wished to travel to Burma. Mahavir *Bhikshu* paid for the train fare from Tahsil Dauriya to Calcutta. After spending a couple of days in Calcutta, I left for Rangoon where I met Gyantrilok yet again. We both travelled to Mandalay and from there went up the Sagai Mountain to *Oo* Rajendra's *Vihar*. (*Oo* is a title of respect attached to names of revered monks or renowned individuals)

This *Vihar* was made up of small huts and about four-five caves. There are around 50 to 60 such Vihars in the Sagai Mountains. People from Mandalay and Sagai village supply food provisions to the monks meditating in the several Vihars. There are many *Dashshildharini* (observers of the ten commandments of good demeanour) *Sanyasins* who cook the food on behalf of the monks. A few Vihars make their own arrangements as one of their monks takes the responsibility of

the kitchen as well. The *Sanyasins* stay at an Ashram away from the Vihars of the male *Bhikshus*. No *Bhikshu* is allowed to visit the Sanyasin Ashram at odd hours. The Sanyasin Ashram accommodates up to 250 to 300 women at one time. The Ashram head is a reputed Burmese lady well versed in *Tripitak* especially *Abhidharmapitak*. She can reproduce few chapters of the last mentioned from sheer memory and hence Buddhist monks shy away from discussing Buddhist philosophy with her.

I and Gyantrilok collected our *Bhiksha* from the Sanyasin Ashram situated on the banks of the river. We finished our meals by ten in the morning and spent the rest of the day in meditation. A *Sthavir* called Uttar taught us the *Dhyan Marg* (*Karma Sthan*). His discourse used to be in Burmese which a young monk from a neighbouring *Vihar* translated in Pali for my benefit. In turn I explained the meaning to Gyantrilok in English.

Our first exercise was to focus our attention on the Burmese

word *Araham* and convey our experiences to Acharya Uttar after every two days. I chose a decrepit cave at the summit of a hillock for my meditation. This peak offered a scenic view of Iravati River down below especially during sunset. Gyantrilok settled for some other location but he simply could not focus on the chosen word. The first letter of *Araham* was clearly visible in his mind's eye but as soon as he moved to the next letter, it would turn into a snake and further concentration became impossible. I made good progress in my contemplation. When we narrated our experiences to Acharya, he revealed the next step that of elaborating the vivid images that came to mind while meditating on the word with eyes closed. I saw a pair of white lotuses followed by a fading solar system. Acharya approved of this imagery and asked me to continue my contemplation on the said images. But Gyantrilok saw bizarre images and he could never focus on them with clarity. Sometimes he saw food items while at other times he had visions of vicious snakes. During that time our subsistence was a big challenge and may be that adversely effected his meditation. Let me cite an example. The narrow cave in which we lived in was without a door. Even if it had one, we couldn't have shut it since there was no other opening for ventilation. The cave had two parts: one in the interiors and the other on the outside. Both could

not accommodate anything more than our wooden cots though the outer section was slightly broader. I slept in the outer part whereas Gyantrilok slept inside. This was his choice probably because he feared that wild animals would barge in anytime. One night before retiring to bed, I joked, "What if this cave was to suddenly give away? We would be trapped inside. Our bodies would be dug out of the rubble after a couple of days. Well, you would suffer more since your section is tucked in the mountain's womb." Gyantrilok didn't get the joke. Stunned by my words, he screamed, "I'll stay here only if you agree to swap our positions. Else I'll shun this cave for good." Needless to say, I had to relent and we even moved our cots to the exchanged positions.

Gyantrilok soon left for Rangoon, disturbed that he was at the Sagai Mountain. But I stayed back. I had come here from *Kushinare* in the December of 1904. Gyantrilok was with me for three months at the most since I recall he left sometime in the March of 1905.

Gradually I had to toil even harder for my sustenance. The Sanyasin women left for some other place with the advent of summer. They, and most of the monks, prefer to stay here only during the winter months when the climate is pleasant.

During summer the weather becomes unbearably hot in this rocky region and water becomes scarce too. For my food, I had to go to the Sagai village which was about two-three miles from my *Vihar*. As it is, the *Bhiksha* was barely enough to ensure my survival and to top it, the difficult commute invariably left me weary and weak.

The *Vihar* next to mine belonged to Pandav *Sthavir*. It was possible to get accommodation here in some small hut and even my sustenance would not have been a problem as the *Vihar* had its own kitchen and more important, the *Sthavir*, as also his disciples, was pure vegetarian. I went up to the *Sthavir* and asked if I could get shelter in his *Vihar*. This *Sthavir* was supposedly well versed in Pali but he could not comprehend my Pali pronunciation and was reluctant to admit the fact. Finally he exploded, “Your Pali accent is flawed. Follow the Burmese way of pronunciation, not the Sanskrit one.” (For instance, the Burmese people pronounce ‘*Sacch*’ as ‘*Tissa*’)

I replied, “Sir, my pronunciation is how the Sinhalese speak Pali. It can’t thus be inferred that that the Burmese pronunciation is superior. However I don’t wish to engage in a debate over pronunciation. As Lord *Buddha* has advised, one should

never deviate from sense in one’s conduct, hence ignore my accent and focus on the meaning.” (*Kankhavitarani*)

This angered the *Sthavir* even more and he retorted, “No wonder your accent matches that of the Sinhalese. Thanks to your flawed pronunciation, *Hindustani* and Sinhalese people are drifting away from Buddhism. While Mohammadan and Christian religions seem to have engulfed Hindustan, even the Sinhalese island has embraced Christianity in a big way.”

I took his leave as it was meaningless to argue with him any further. But before I left, I asked him again about the possibility of securing a hut in his *Vihar*. He told he would give it a thought. But when I enquired the next day, I got a negative answer. Indeed, my correct pronunciation had failed me!

The Mandalay Sojourn

In search of the next option, I went up the *Vihar* on another hilltop where a middle aged monk lived with two or three young *Shramners*. He agreed to provide me shelter but made it clear that he could not arrange for my food. The place was a mile away from the banks of river Irawati where few *Sanyasins* had set up base. Besides, there was a small village nearby. I

decided to stay put at the *Vihar* till I could. Hardly a fortnight passed and I was down with high fever from the oily food and the strain of the commute. Even the water here was highly contaminated as it was collected in a big tank and meant to last till the next monsoon. Till I could manage, I went to the river to fetch water but during my illness I was forced to drink the tank water. I boiled it before consumption but that hardly made it potable. After a week of misery, I finally dragged my weak body and somehow moved to Mandalay.

Here I stayed at the Ashram of *Oo Trilok Sthavir* who spoke chaste Pali and fortunately his accent matched mine too. He was in his sixties and known to be a man of principles. If his disciples ever woke up late, he admonished them in stern words, "Little girls of Mandalay are up at dawn to prepare your meals. Rather than show your gratitude, all you do is catch forty winks. You should be ashamed of yourselves!" He penalised the late-risers by making them water the plants of the *Vihar* and fill the water pots near the *Buddha* idol. One day I saw him watering the plants himself. When I asked him about it, he calmly answered, "Rules are to be complied with, not breached. We progress in life so long as we abide by rules. We should always respect the cardinal fact that law is above all."

On another occasion I saw him treading the streets of Mandalay braving rain and sludge. I asked him, "Why did you step out in the rain?" He replied, "People of this place don't entertain young *Bhikshus*. All they offer them is dry rice. Unless I beg for alms myself, we won't get the vegetables and curry that we need. When I eat a hearty meal myself, I can't let my disciples subsist on dry rice alone." It would be evident to my readers by now that Acharya *Oo Trilok* loved discipline but he was a kind soul all the same and he had a soft corner for me. Being his guest, I was exempt from waking up early as also from any housekeeping at the *Vihar*. He had instructed a few families from the village to prepare my *Bhiksha* as per the *Hindustani* tradition.

I visited around ten to twelve households daily and returned to the *Vihar* after collecting a little food from each home. There were around 10,000 monks in Mandalay and the local populace was far from well-off. It was thus impossible to procure adequate food for all *Bhikshus*. The young monks couldn't even dream of fetching curry and vegetables by themselves.

Despite being a visitor to this place, I never encountered any problem with my *Bhiksha* rounds. The water was potable

too and hence for some time I felt much better here than I did in Sagai. But I gradually realised that the Burmese food was making me sick. Milk and milk products have no place in the Burmese diet and they cook their food in sesame oil. This intake impaired my digestion. It was the month of May and I couldn't cope with the hot weather either. I shifted to Moulmein in the hope of some relief from the physical strain. My ticket till Rangoon was sponsored by a trust incepted for the promotion of Buddhism in Mandalay. This trust helped needy monks, organised lectures and published books devoted to Buddhist literature. I completed the last leg of my journey by ship. There's vast difference in the Vihars of Mandalay and Moulmein. The wealthy merchants of Moulmein have built remarkably spacious Vihars and some of them have been adorned with golden carvings. There are only a handful of monks here unlike Mandalay where thousands have to clamour for space and survival.

In Moulmein each *Vihar* accommodates at the most five monks at one time and the locals pamper them with hearty donations. In fact each monk has to hire a porter to carry the alms home. I stayed at the sprawling Vaijayant *Vihar* of *Sthavir* Do Sagar in a small room near the *Stupa*. On days of no rain, I went to the top of the hill for a panoramic view of

the landscape below. Sadly food was a problem here too. I largely survived on boiled green grams, rice and packaged butter. Once in a while, I had curd and for a few days one *Hindustani* peon used to fetch me some Dal. I found Moulmein much better than Mandalay. After *Chaturmas*, I got an invitation from one *Sthavir* Pragyaswami to stay at his *Vihar*. I went there after I got the nod from *Sthavir* Sagar. At the new place, I taught *Mugdhbodh* to Pragyaswami and he taught me *Abhidharmarthasangrah* in return. But yet again my health suffered from the oily food. I tried a Parsi doctor's medicine but didn't feel any better and almost gave up all hope. The doctor had given me some oil for feet massage. The bottle had the word 'Poison' etched on the label. I felt inclined to gulp it down and put an end to the ordeal but good sense prevailed in good time and I threw the bottle out of the window and slept.

I went to an island next to Moulmein called Bilu Kyun with an intention to get my vitality back. I camped in a tiny hut amidst dense forest cover but my health didn't improve. From there I shifted five-six miles away from Moulmein in another forest of gorgeous streams where some sturdy wooden huts have been built for the use of monks. I stayed here for a fortnight in a secluded hut. The jungle was home to some ferocious

tigers but I didn't face any untoward incident throughout my stay. Sustenance was the only pain point since I had to walk for about three miles daily for my *Bhiksha*. And after all the effort, all I fetched was dry rice. Meat and fish were available in abundance but of what use were they to me?

Slowly and steadily I came to the conclusion that further sustenance in Burma was more or less impossible. The monks here can't cook their own food and I couldn't survive on begged food. Finally I decided to get back to India in the hope of spending the rest of my life in some apt location. But Pragyaswami was of the opinion that it was impossible for me to practice the austerities of a monk in the absence of other Buddhist *Bhikshus*. In response, I requested him to allow me to give up my monkery as at times I would be forced to keep money on me or have food after 12 noon. Pragyaswami agreed and ordered a few saffron robes for me. But he changed his stance soon after and told me, "I can't bear to see you give up monkery in my presence. It would be better if you complete this formality in Calcutta." I agreed partly out of compulsion and partly out of my respect for him. Getting back to Calcutta proved not much of a hassle. I boarded the ship from Rangoon on a second class ticket.

From the January of 1904 to the January of 1906, I suffered

severe physical torment but on the other hand, my mental faculties were sharpened appreciatively. With my improved concentration, I could comprehend intricate literature like the *Abhidharma* in good time. I read a lot in my spare time and revised the inaugural passages of the *Vishuddhimarg* couple of times. The horizon of my experience well and truly expanded with the visit to different countries and the interaction with several Sthavirs.



16. REFLECTION

From the time I left home till my return to Calcutta from Burma in 1906, I was busy acquiring as much knowledge as I could about Lord *Buddha* and his teachings. Now I aspired to do my bit to promote the Buddhist thought in Hindustan but I was not sure how to go about it. I thought of spending some time at Umravati before exploring options in a city like Pune. But an unexpected turn of events set me rolling on a different trajectory. This chapter unfolds the twist in my tale.

Chance meeting with Harinath De

A *Vihar* called Bouddh Dhamankur had been recently set up in a shabby locality of Calcutta's Kapali Tola. Save for the *Buddha* idol, this place had nothing that would qualify it as a *Vihar*. But this was the only accommodation I could manage at that time since the Mahabodhi Sabha had moved out of the rented office space and all its paraphernalia had been transferred to Kashi. Two monks from Chittagong, Krupacharan and Gunalankar, stayed here. An occasional

visitor was one Harinath De who was a student of Pali. Another Burmese monk called Purna stayed at a rented place nearby and he was a close associate of Harinath. I knew Purna from my Ceylon days and he had heard from others of my voyages in Burma as well.

I intended to stay at the *Vihar* for a couple of days but I sensed both Krupacharan and Gunalankar were keen to see me off at the earliest. I assured them that I sought nothing from them and would leave for Nagpur after spending one night at the *Vihar*. As soon as Purna came to know of my schedule, he rushed to inform Harinath De, "A revered Pali scholar has arrived here in our midst, someone you won't find even in Ceylon or Burma. But he's scheduled to leave Calcutta tomorrow."

Harinath De was busy with the marriage ceremony of his brother at that time. As soon as he found some time off, he met me and pleaded, "Please stay put for a day or two more. I wish to talk to you in detail." He introduced

himself as a senate member and professor of English. He said he wished to promote the Pali language far and wide. His plea had little effect on me as I was aware of the fact that Bengalis love to talk a lot, often with no thought to the ensuing action. Of all people, they seemed the least likely to spare a thought for the larger cause of Buddhism. Right or wrong, that was what I believed at that time. Yet I stayed back for a day more for I didn't wish to disappoint a man of such stature who had made what seemed like an earnest request.

It wouldn't be inapt to briefly mention Harinath De's background at this juncture although I was not aware of it during our initial interaction. A Bengali gentleman of *Kayasth* caste Bhootnath De set up his practice at Raipur (Central Provinces) after having diligently cleared his Bachelor of Law exam. Harinath, his eldest son, was quite dumb as a child, so his father never bothered to enroll him at school. As years passed by the young Harinath learnt Bengali and Hindi from his mother and later a missionary taught him English as well. When he was eight, his father thought of admitting him to some school but by then he had learnt much more than the students of his age. He appointed a home tutor for Harinath and he himself taught his son when

time permitted. Harinath made phenomenal progress in English and stood first in the matriculation examination of the Calcutta University and went on to win a scholarship. Later while studying at St. Xavier's College, he fared well in all the university examinations. After his MA, he went to England on a government scholarship. He appeared for the Civil Service examinations but failed to clear them, partly due to his poor preparation of Maths and Law subjects and partly due to his sporadic drinking habit. Without losing hope, he secured a BA from Cambridge University. He also majored in Latin from Calcutta University and stood first in Greek, Latin and English. Besides, he had excellent command over French, German and Arabic too. He hardly took any time to master any language. A gentleman once told me he knew the entire Arabic dictionary by heart. In English, he wrote prose and poetry with equal flair. After his BA from Cambridge, he joined the Indian Educational Service and was posted as professor of English at the Dhaka University. He lost his father soon after. Long before my return to Calcutta; he was transferred to the Presidency College and stayed in a rented house on Dharamtola Street.

When we met at the appointed hour the next day, he requested him to stay in Calcutta for three years at least.

He said, “I wish to do my MA in Pali. I have read most of the literature but the *Atthasalini* is beyond me. I have approached several monks besides consulting many scholars in Germany and elsewhere but to no avail. I would be most obliged if you could help me grasp this intricate subject in a couple of months. I am ready to provide whatever you wish in return.”

I replied, “I surely wish to help you but I can’t function from this *Vihar*. I am now used to solitude and this place offers none. If you can find me some secluded place, I can stay put in Calcutta as you desire.”

Harinath De showed me two detached rooms in the courtyard of his father-in-law’s house which was close to his own. In case I didn’t approve of them, he was ready to provide a rented accommodation somewhere else. I didn’t want to needlessly burden him with overheads, hence I immediately moved to the said place. I went to Harinath’s home for lunch since he stayed close by. I was here till March 15, 1906 during which I helped Harinath to comprehend the *Atthasalini* pointing out the countless errors in the copy published by the Pali Text Society. He was awestruck by my authority over the subject and begged me to settle in

Calcutta for good.

During this time, I happened to meet Shri Manmohan Ghosh²⁶ at Harinath’s home. Shri Manmohan was professor of English at the Presidency College and the grandson of Bengal’s renowned social activist Rajnarayan Basu. His father worked in the Indian Medical Service. Manmohan’s elder brother was secretary to the Maharaja of Cooch Behar and the younger Arvind Ghosh occupied an influential position with the Baroda state before he became the Principal of Calcutta National College. The youngest Barindra Ghosh, a prime accused in the Maniktola bomb conspiracy, was sentenced to life imprisonment to the Andamans. Manmohan Ghosh was well known for his mastery over the English language and some of his poems won him critical acclaim in England. In 1906, a tragedy befell him when his wife became critical owing to a severe mental disorder. A poet at heart, he found it very difficult to come to terms with this tragedy. I happened to meet him in this trying phase of his life and he found solace in reading some of the Buddhist literature I shared with him. We often discussed several matters related to Buddhism during that time.

²⁶ Noted poet and professor of English, one of the three sons of Krishnadhan Ghosh, a renowned doctor from Bhagalpur. His siblings were Barindra Ghosh (a well-known revolutionary who was sentenced to life imprisonment in Andaman Island) and Arvind Ghosh (reformist and founder of Aurobindo ashram in Pondicherry)

A visit to Sikkim

Sometime after March 15, I thought of going to Sikkim to learn about the Buddhist practices there, like I had done down south. Harinath helped me in every possible way to bring my Sikkim plan to fruition. On behalf of the Buddhdharmankur Sabha, Harinath had taken the initiative to felicitate the Tashi lama when he visited Calcutta in December 1905. During this time, Harinath had made the acquaintance of dignitaries like Captain O'Connor and Resident of Sikkim Mr. White. He gave me two letters of introduction: one addressed to the Prince of Sikkim and the other to Mr. White. Shri Manmohan Ghosh intimated the headmaster of the Darjeeling government school to make arrangements for my accommodation at his place. Harinath De sponsored the entire cost of my travel.

I left Calcutta on March 20. Before leaving, I gave up my monkey through a formal ceremony as I needed to carry money with me and would have to consume food at odd hours. The train journey till Darjeeling was hassle-free but the Darjeeling-Sikkim journey had to be covered on foot. I couldn't trust the Tibetan porters to escort me safely in the unknown region. Hence the headmaster sent his gardener

for company besides two Bhotia labourers to carry my books and luggage. The gardener proved very resourceful especially in arranging food and snacks in quick time. The road was a smooth walk, the result of the groundwork done prior to the visit of the Young Husband Mission a year back. On the way we saw a corpse lying by the road side, probably of a murdered man. We reached our destination at sunset. There were a few Tibetan hutments around but didn't seem safe enough. I went straight to the Government circuit house but the watchman wouldn't let us in. He told us sternly, "You can't enter without the permission of the Sikkim Government. If you wish, you may sleep on the platform outside." I retorted, "I would be staying with the prince of Sikkim. If his palace doors are open to me, can't I spend a night at this circuit house?" The poor watchman was petrified at the mention of the prince and opened the gates in a flash. The Bhotia labourers slept outside and I and the gardener settled indoors. I slept like a log from the strain of the long walk. The next day I went to the bungalow and showed the Buddhdharmankur Sabha letter to the prince. He welcomed me in and allotted me a quarter in his premises. An aide prepared my lunch as per my instructions. I tried to learn the Tibetan language from the headmaster of an Anglo vernacular school, a Bhotia gentleman called

Dav Sandap Kazi. But my learning didn't progress beyond the elementary acquaintance with Tibetan alphabets. He had very little time to spare and even I had lost most of my inherent tenacity to learn a new language.

Honestly I was quite fed up of the place. I recalled Tibetan Resident Mr. White cautioning me when I had met him with Harinath De's letter, "You won't like it here. Forget the future of Buddhism in Sikkim; these people don't even qualify to be called Buddhists." He was absolutely right. Although the horrific practice of cow-slaughter has been recently banned, the Lama has no qualms with the slaughter of pigs as a means of sustenance for the monks. These people are so unhygienic in their routine life that I found it sickening to eat the food cooked by them.

Frog meal

A Tibetan lama stayed at a *Mutt* built by the Sikkim King. He was known to be a very learned man and could speak a bit of *Hindustani* too. His disciple was well versed in Hindi. One day the disciple invited me for lunch on his master's behalf. I told him I don't eat fish or meat and hence it made little sense to host a feast for me. But when he assured me that

all arrangements would be made to my liking, I reluctantly agreed and went to the *Mutt* the next day. Two huge plates were placed on the table; both had earthen bowls filled with portions that looked like meat. I enquired, "Sir is that meat served in the bowl?" He pulled out his tongue - as Tibetans do to convey astonishment - and exclaimed, "How can we serve you meat or fish when we know that you don't touch them. We have made this delicacy especially for you." I persisted, "But what is that delicacy?" Lama calmly replied, "That's only a frog. Don't worry, we don't have filthy frogs here like those found in Hindustan. We have fetched this frog fresh from the jungle today." I was stunned by his reply and the lama seemed downcast by my refusal. "Why should his guest feel sore after such royal arrangements?" he seemed to wonder. I ate some milk and rice for his sake, more like a dose of medicine. The Lama was savouring his lunch lamenting in between that I had missed a sumptuous frog meal. After four-five days, I got another invitation for lunch, this one from the queen herself. I made it explicitly clear that I didn't eat any form of meat including frogs or any other animal for that matter. Who knew I would find a rat in lieu of a frog on my plate this time.

While I was at Sikkim, Harinath went abroad with the

Maharaja of Burdwan sometime in April. He wrote to me from Eden urging me to return to Calcutta. I didn't give his request much thought but soon I got another letter, this one from Shri Manmohan Ghosh. He felt my Sikkim stint didn't serve any national interest. Instead if I returned to Calcutta, the emergent renaissance in the country had a lot to gain from the Buddhist teachings. This plea made a deep impact on my mind. Till date I wandered from forest to forest and *Vihar* to *Vihar* in search of higher knowledge. But now, I felt, the time was ripe to do my bit for the country.

Yet engaging in social service was easier said than done. Neither was I a university graduate nor did I have the backing of any legacy institution. Forget selfless service, I was not sure of helping my own cause. I had already explored a few options earlier. I had proposed the idea of a Pali class to the bigwigs of Calcutta like P K Roy. In return I expected only lodging and boarding, nothing else. Even my garments could have been arranged from Burma. And yet these big shots were not ready to back me. Worse I saw a marked abhorrence for the Buddhist faith in their eyes. I had Harinath De by my side but his support was far from genuine. It was only the upshot of his self-seeking motives for he didn't believe in any faith, Buddhism included. I had gauged his true colours in the two

months of our acquaintance.

Now that I was no longer a monk, I was free to think of my livelihood. I thought of exploring humdrum options of serving the larger cause of Pali on the backing of a few like-minded notables of Bengal. And if I was to earn money anyway, why not lend a helping hand to my family as well? Accordingly I wrote to Shri Vishnu Naik asking him about the current position of my family debt. He replied informing me that the debt was still unpaid and worse the interest over the years had piled up. However my wife was very happy to learn that I was safe and sound. Ever since I left Madras, I hadn't written a single letter back home and hence she would have presumed I was long dead. Now that this letter dispelled all doubts, she would have heaved a sigh of relief.

Inception of National College

When Harinath was back in Calcutta in July 1906, he wrote to me again urging me to leave Sikkim. I was already inclined to join the mainstream and finally I left for Calcutta in end-July. As soon as I was back, I got busy with the elucidation of *Thergatha* for Harinath De's MA exam. But I now no longer hinged on his support. When I learnt that

Sir Gurudas Banerjee and Dr. Rasbihari Ghosh²⁷ planned to establish a National College in Calcutta, I tried my best to get Pali included in the curriculum. Shri Manmohan Ghosh was of great help in this effort. He introduced me to Shri Satyendranath Tagore who had Pali incorporated in the college curriculum at extremely short notice. My salary was however fixed at a meagre 30 rupees. Nevertheless I was overjoyed at the golden opportunity and assumed charge as professor of Pali from August 15, 1906, the very day of National College's inception.

De seemed visibly annoyed with this development. Perhaps he didn't like the fact that I didn't consult him prior to making the move. He reasoned, "The National College is an anti-establishment body and I happen to be a government servant. How can our alliance continue? If it was a job you were after, I could have helped you with several cushy options but henceforth I can't do much for you." I explained, 'Employment was never my principle motive. I only wish to do my bit in the mainstream of public service and help my family in the same breath. The founders Dr. Rasbihari Bose and Sir Gurudas Banerjee are held in high esteem so it's likely unlikely that I would face trouble from the government. And

however revolutionary the institution may be, one can't but teach rebellion through the Pali language. Having said that if you feel my association is detrimental to your advancement, I am ready to leave your place at this very moment. Having eaten food at your place on several occasions and being a true Maharashtrian, I can't bear to bring disrepute to your name."

Harinath was taken aback by my make or break proposition. He mellowed down and said, "Don't leave as of now. I will enquire with my friends what the government makes of the association and inform you accordingly. This dialogue hardly made an impression on me as I suspected he knew for sure that his position was secure. I stayed overnight at his home following his insistence. The next morning, he softened his stance even further. He confessed, "I regret my unruly behaviour that caused you much distress yesterday. I have been assured that your National College stint would in no way jeopardise my position. Feel free to serve the National College but don't leave my place." From that day, he even dropped me to the college in his car.

Very few students had enrolled for my Pali course at the college but most of them were diligent and hardworking

²⁷ Leading congress activist, renowned lawyer, was actively associated with Calcutta university and was one of its leading patrons

pupils. Two of them went to earn Harvard degrees in 1915. Money wise the job didn't help me much. I doubt whether 30 rupees per month would have been enough to feed my family had I settled for good.

The college principal in the initial years was Shri Arvind Ghosh but after his name was dragged in the Vandemataram trial, he resigned from his post. His successor Shri Satishchandra Mukherjee was highly sceptical about me and was dead against my appointment in the first place, I learnt later. In his capacity as the principal, he strictly warned me not to teach anything related to the Buddhist religion in the class. I replied, "In that case, it's better to discontinue the class since it's impossible to find a Pali book that doesn't make a mention of Buddhism." He retorted, "No harm in teaching what's mentioned in the books but don't encourage students to become Buddhists. I reasoned, "I have not joined this college as a Buddhist missionary. If I wish to promote the religion, I will join some other institution. But I will not shy away from elucidating the Pali texts to my students and if you wish to dissuade me from doing so, I will tender my resignation right away." Mukherjee never bothered me again after this riposte. Students held me in high esteem and hence Mukherjee had to bow down before the consensus.

In fact he later urged me to deliver lectures on Buddhism for the benefit of my students.

Home after seven years

In October 1906 I planned a visit to my home in Goa. A gentleman called Shri Palit accompanied me till Mumbai but he went back to Calcutta due to ill-health. On the way to Mumbai, we stayed at Shri Madhavrao Padhye's place in Nagpur and subsequently proceeded to Umravati to meet Shri Govindrao Kane who informed me that Dr. Bhandarkar was keen to meet me. I said, "This is hard to believe. As far as I remember, he was quite annoyed with me." Kane replied, "What you say is true. I met him at Lonavala immediately after your first visit to Umravati. He initially frowned at the mention of your name but when I told him about your progress in Pali, he seemed keen to meet you and has left a message with me to that effect."

The Prarthana Samaj speech

I was keen on meeting Dr. Bhandarkar but since I was headed towards Goa via Mumbai, I didn't have time for the detour to Pune. The Prarthana Samaj annual festival was underway

at Mumbai at that time and Shri Kane was aware of this fact. He sent a telegram at the Sabha address in the surety that Dr. Devdutt Bhandarkar²⁸ would attend the event. Without delivering any lecture at Umravati this time round, I went straight to Mumbai. I learnt later that Dr. Bhandarkar had come to the station to receive me but we missed each other somehow. I and my friend Shri Palit checked in at Sukh Niwas near Girgaum Portuguese Church. After lunch I left alone for Dr. Shridhar Bhandarkar's home. I waited for him in the living room as he was having his bath at that time. After a few minutes he appeared in his bath robe and spoke to me with great warmth. That evening four lectures were scheduled at the Prarthana Samaj, each a biography of different saints. Dr. Bhandarkar requested me to talk on *Buddha-Charitra*. I had lost touch with Marathi all these years but agreed to make a short address for his sake. Before my lecture Dr. Bhandarkar introduced me and my work as also sportingly acknowledged the fact that he didn't have any idea of my capabilities when I first met him at Pune. I do not know how my lecture was received but thanks to Dr. Bhandarkar's preface, people of Mumbai, especially the Prarthana Samaj members, came to know me well so much so that I stayed at the Sabha's Rammohan Ashram during all my subsequent

visits to Mumbai.

After a couple of days in Mumbai, I boarded a ship to Panaji and went to Murgaoon by a ferryboat late in the night. The next day I went to Madgaon and met my relatives Shri Bhiku Naik who received me well this time round. Shri Vishnu Naik was equally cordial. We together went to Sankhval to my ancestral home. My wife broke into tears finding me in Bengali garbs. But Vishnu Naik consoled her as also reassured the family that I was safe and sound.

I couldn't afford to be home for long for I had to reach Calcutta before the end of the October Durgapuja vacation. I moved back to Madgaon in a couple of days. My wife was all set to accompany me to Calcutta but my daughter simply refused to come along as she was scared of my long beard. Ultimately we had to leave her with her grandmother in Chikli before we both left for Calcutta.

I had telegraphed Harinath De about my return. He made arrangements for a separate kitchen for us in his own house. It was difficult to survive on a salary of 30 rupees a month but since we didn't have to pay any room rent or incur any major household cost, we barely managed to meet two ends. In

²⁸ Son of well known research scholar and Indologist R G Bhandarkar, long standing official of the Indian Historical Records Commission, elder brother Shridhar was a noted Sanskrit scholar

December my wife fell ill and had to be moved back to Goa. Harinath paid for all expenses on this occasion from his own pocket.

University Lecturer

In late 1906 Harinath De cleared his MA with a first class in Pali. Later with the backing of Justice Mukherjee²⁹, he became a member of the University Syndicate. The university had to appoint a few lecturers as per the new law. Harinath got me enrolled as a Pali lecturer since his word carried much weight in the university. All lecturers were honorary barring me and Satyavrat Samashrami. A salary of 100 rupees a month was fixed for us both. I joined the University in July 1907 but before that I had sought Justice Mukherjee's consent to remain associated with the National College as before. He assured me, "As long as you promptly fulfil your University obligations, we are not concerned with how and where you spend the remaining time." After joining the university, I taught at the National College without remuneration all throughout my Calcutta stint.

The University lectureship improved my financial position for

sure. Besides the salary, I also earned 600 to 900 rupees in the capacity of an examiner. But the work was not to my satisfaction. As a lecturer I just had to take three hours of classes every day. None of my students seemed genuinely interested in the subject. Their sole motive was to somehow clear the university exam and secure a plush job at the earliest. All in all, my Calcutta stint didn't do me any good apart from bringing me some fame and money. I was keen to promote the invaluable literature of Pali across different parts of Hindustan and I saw it as my life work. I still do. Hence I found every other purpose and benefit miniscule in comparison.

On the personal front I couldn't even succeed in reducing my father's debt, forget squaring it off. All the money went into paying off accumulated debt of only a few years. To top it all, we had to file a court case in August 1907 in connection with one of our father's plots. Forty years back my father had some dispute with a jeweller over a piece of land. But at least I had not known of its recurrence in all these years. In 1907, Shri Ram Naik Banwalikar of the neighbouring village secured all rights of the disputed property from the jeweller's descendants and made a fresh claim on the disputed plot. I rushed to Goa immediately

²⁹ Sir Ashutosh Mukherjee, founder and justice of Calcutta High Court

after attending the Surat Congress meet in December 1907 with an intention to ensure an out of court settlement. Unfortunately Ram Naik had already lodged a police complaint against my brother and had gained possession of the said land by then. Going against the wishes of my family, I requested his elder brother to settle the matter amicably. Ram Naik was adamant and demanded an astronomical amount for the land. We were left with no option but to take the matter to court. Almost all the landlords of our village stood as our witnesses. Ram Naik had produced a few labourers as witnesses from his side. The district judge and the high court both gave the verdict in our favour. (Both these judgements were passed while I was in America) The police complaint against my brother was also proved baseless. We won the case but all my savings from the Calcutta job were spent in the process. In all, one thousand rupees went down the drain. I was extremely depressed to see the vindictive nature of my supposed mates of childhood days. The situation in Goa has indeed gone from bad to worse. The Hindu people here have lost the capacity to judge what's good or bad for them. In such an insecure environment I wondered whether we would be able to live in peace even if we managed to pay off all debts.

Harinath De was beyond doubt one of my ardent well-wishers. He had even given up his alcoholism for my sake when I stayed with him during 1906. His mother always voiced her gratitude as she believed I was responsible for his transformation. She had full faith in the premonition of one astrologer that a regular study of Buddhist teachings will keep her son free of all vices. But ever since Harinath de was appointed the principal of Hoogly College, his addiction resurfaced with a vengeance. Later he assumed a key position at the Imperial Library on a handsome salary of 1100 rupees. He owed this elevation to me. Thanks to his command over Pali, he became a favourite of Lord Bishop Coplestone of Calcutta who was himself a Pali enthusiast and sought De's help in learning more about the language. He in turn helped De in securing the influential position. I was always thrilled to hear of De's rising fame. At the same time, the whispers linked to his growing addiction would sadden me. When he returned from Hoogly, I didn't stay with him. Dharpal had reclaimed the rented space of the Mahabodhi Sabha. I stayed there for a few days and then briefly shifted to the residence of Shri Ambikacharan Sen at Baliganj. While I was here, I once went to meet Harinath at the Calcutta Club where he had booked a spacious room at 90 rupees a month supposedly for Dr. Pishel of Germany who was expected to visit Calcutta

in a couple of months. I found one or two Bengali Pandits in the room along with a couple of De's drinking companions. For the first time, Harinath drank in my presence. Not that he lost his composure but I was extremely hurt by what I saw and resolved to leave Calcutta at the earliest.

By now I had made several acquaintances in Calcutta, some even from De's enemy camp. I learnt some of them were my admirers. Even so I never made any effort to break the ice with them despite the fact that a few of them were honest and generous souls. I would have perhaps profited from their alliance but it was not my nature to run after opportunities in predatory fashion.

In short, I had no purpose left in Calcutta. Neither could I do anything in the larger interest of my students nor could I rescue my dear friend from the groove of his self-inflicted disgrace. Clouded with such depressing thoughts, I was desperate to further my mission in some place away from Calcutta. How I accidentally succeeded in this endeavour has been elaborated in the succeeding chapter.



17. PATRONAGE OF SHRIMANT GAIKWAD

I had heard, many years ago, that the Maharaja of Baroda Shrimant Sayajirao Gaikwad was a worshipper of knowledge. So when he came to Calcutta in December 1906 as the President of an industrial convention, I was eager to meet him. I conveyed my desire to Shri Satyendranath Tagore ICS whom I knew since the inception of National Collage. He had great respect for Maharashtrian people in particular. He assured me, "I know Shri Romeshchandra Dutt³⁰- Maharaja's Dewan- very well. I'll tell him to arrange the needful."

But Romeshchandra Dutt was of not much help. He plainly replied, "You won't achieve anything meeting me or Maharaj. Baroda has no use for Buddhist thought and Maharaj has little faith in it." As we stepped out of his house, I had almost given up hope when Shri Tagore consoled me, "Please don't feel bad, even I know Maharaj well enough. Come to my place at around 7 tomorrow morning and I'll take you to him. The next day I went to Shri Tagore's place on 19, Store

Road, Baliganj at the appointed hour. As he stepped out of his house, I rushed to arrange a car for him since his car was not available for the day. But he stopped me short and said that he preferred to walk instead as he was used to daily morning walks. That day we couldn't meet the Maharaj as he was out on some work. Tagore left a message with his private secretary Shri (now Sir) Manubhai Mehta before we left.

Even after this reminder, nothing would have transpired had it not been for the few gentlemen, all beneficiaries of the Baroda state, who constantly reminded Manubhai of our message. Finally I met the Maharaj after a couple of days. He didn't have more than fifteen minutes to spare so he quipped at the end of our brief conversation, "Come to Baroda once. We have a lot to discuss. At the moment I am stuck with several pending matters."

I couldn't leave Calcutta in the next few days. Later I managed to visit Baroda on my way back from Goa

³⁰ One of the first ICS officers from Bengal, noted author and research scholar

where I dropped my wife home after having taken a few days off from National College. I stayed at the home of Shri Ravji Raghunath Shirgaonkar whom I had met in Calcutta before. He was now posted as the assistant treasury officer. I had to stay put at his place for over a week waiting for a tete-a-tete with Maharaj. First the Maharaj was away on a hunting expedition and then his paternal aunt expired. When he learnt I had been waiting for him; he called me to the palace during the mourning period itself. After a long conversation, he told me, "I can't arrange for your lectures and other events during my bereavement but do call on me the next time you are in Baroda." He had 160 rupees withdrawn from the treasury to cover my to and fro conveyance.

Once back in Calcutta, I got busy in routine affairs and lost all touch with the Baroda state. Almost one year later, I got a letter from the state informing me that Maharaj often remembers me and is desirous of a meeting if and when I happen to visit Baroda. At that time it was impossible to take some time off my college responsibilities so I replied vide a letter, "I would come to Baroda during the summer vacation after confirming Maharaj's schedule during that time."

But it was only in July that I managed to go to Baroda after having spent the entire vacation at Goa. This time the Maharaj arranged for a lecture of mine which was well received by the audience. The Maharaj called me to his palace afterward and asked, "Are you willing to leave Calcutta and work from Baroda?" I replied, "I have no inclination towards amassing wealth and growing rich. I would be perfectly happy to be able to do the work I love and also fetch enough money for my sustenance." He remarked, "I will help you in every capacity if you agree to settle in Baroda." I reasoned, "I feel his majesty should not put forth Baroda as a necessary condition. Wherever I may be, I won't fail in my duty of spreading the Buddhist teachings for the benefit of my fellow Maharashtrians. I instead request you to allow me to settle in some place like Mumbai or Pune and support me towards my sustenance."

The Maharaj didn't make any commitment at that time and left for Pune soon. I too returned to Calcutta and got busy with my work. After a fortnight, the Maharaj's private secretary sent me a telegram from Pune. It read as follows: "The Baroda state will pay you a stipend of 50 rupees per month for three years irrespective of your residence anywhere in Maharashtra. You would be required to write at least one

book every year for the Baroda state during this period.” This telegram was originally sent to my Goa address and later redirected to Calcutta. Hence there was some delay before it reached my hands. In the meantime there was one more telegram from the private secretary urging me to send a reply to the first. I had a quick word with Harinath De and Justice Mukherjee about my new plans and then immediately conveyed my grateful acceptance of the Maharaj’s offer through a telegram. I had also informed through a letter that I intended to move to Pune only in October. The secretary replied back that the Baroda state had no objection if I wished to stay at Calcutta for a month more.

I happened to meet the Burmese gentleman Honourable Mong Ba Tu in Calcutta. He promised me to hand over a printed copy of the *Tripitak* and invited me to Burma for that. I went to Burma in September with an allowance of 300-400 rupees from the Calcutta University to buy all the Pali books that were available. I met our *Sthavir* at Moulmein on this occasion. He received me warmly although I was not a monk anymore. Mong Ba Tu gifted me Pali books worth 250 rupees which are of invaluable help to this day. Thanks only to these books; I could do justice to my primary job of teaching Pali to my students.

Dilemma over Calcutta University

When I returned from Burma in late September, a dramatic development at the Calcutta University was waiting to greet me. My salary had been raised from 100 rupees to 250 rupees and I was expected to sign a bond in exchange that made it obligatory for me to stay put in Calcutta for the next three years. I was sure this was the handiwork of De and Justice Mukherjee. I asked De, “I accepted the Baroda offer only after consulting you. How come you now expect me to go back on my word?” He took me to Justice Mukherjee who stated, “It’s true that we didn’t stop you from going elsewhere. But now we feel your presence in Calcutta will more than help us promote the Pali language in Calcutta and hence the insistence to hold you back. If you feel awkward about breaching the promise made to the Maharaj, I will write to him myself in the capacity of the University Vice chancellor requesting him to let us retain you for the next three years. If you wish, I’ll send a telegram right away. But please don’t even think of leaving Calcutta.” I didn’t give him any definite reply and promised to revert after due consideration.

I was now perplexed beyond imagination. On the one side was a plum, secure job of 250 rupees, on the other was what

I considered my lifework. After much vacillation, I was very happy that my decision didn't deviate from my mission. The very next day I had all my books couriered to Mumbai with the help of Shri Anandrao Madgaonkar. I recollect having told his father Shri Dinanathrao Madgaonkar³¹, "Thanks to the blessings of the Buddha and Bodhisatva, I was able to rise above greed and self-indulgence."

I still owed some interim explanation to my friend Harinath De. I told him, "I don't think I should expect Maharaj's reply by post. I will meet him in person and will promptly inform you of the ensuing developments. Till such time, I won't be able to confirm anything to the Syndicate" Harinath gave me a letter addressed to the Maharaj. In the letter he had elaborated how my presence was extremely beneficial to Calcutta and hence critical.

First meeting with Dr. Woods

Taking leave of Harinath De and Justice Mukherjee, I left for Mumbai in October 1908. As decided earlier, I sent my resignation letter to the Calcutta University registrar and wrote personal letters of regret to De and Justice Mukherjee

making it amply clear that I feared the moral ignominy that would arise if I accepted the University offer solely for the money. I also conveyed that I didn't wish to raise the issue with the Maharaj regardless of his rejoinder, affirmative or otherwise.

In Mumbai, I met Dr. Vasudev Anant Sukhtankar for the first time. I also spent good time with one my acquaintances Shri Krishnarao Madgaonkar and his younger brother Shri Balwantrao Madgaonkar during the same visit. This association soon graduated into lifelong friendship. I stayed at Shri Madgaonkar's bungalow in Borivali with my family for a couple of months. During this time, Dr. James Wood, professor at Harvard University, was in Maharashtra for pursuing Sanskrit education. He and Dr. Sukhtankar studied together during their student days in Germany and Dr. Sukhtankar had told him at length about me. He was hence keen to meet me in person but at that time he was in Matheran where his wife was recuperating from a bout of illness. On his request I and Dr. Sukhtankar met him at the hill station. Later when he shifted to the Taj Mahal Hotel in Mumbai, he commuted to the Borivali bungalow daily to learn Pali from me. But his wife again fell ill after about a fortnight and only to suit his convenience, I shifted with

³¹ One of the prime followers and assistants of Dr. Bhandarkar and Justice Ranade, His son Govind Dinanathrao Madgaonkar later became the justice of Mumbai High Court

my family to a Chawl in nearby Girgaum. He had initially asked Dr. Sukhtankar whether I could commute to the hotel every day for the Pali lessons but when Dr. Sukhtankar himself dismissed the idea adding that such insistence would needlessly prove detrimental to his cause, he didn't pursue the request with me. Instead he requested that I shift to Mumbai which I did, thanks to Dr. Sukhtankar's help who arranged for our accommodation. Dr. Woods paid our house rent. Other than relocating to the new place at short notice, I didn't face any hassle.

Dr. Woods was in Mumbai till the end of February 1909 after which he went back home after a brief detour to Japan. After sending my family back to Goa, I went to Pune to find a suitable accommodation. Initially I stayed in a small house on Sadashiv Peth and later shifted to Ravivar Peth on the upper floor of another house. I couldn't work to my satisfaction during this period but managed to complete substantial portions of *Vishuddhimarg* in Devanagari script. Besides I wrote an abridged Marathi translation of *Bodhicharyaa-Avatara*, prepared a Sanskrit primer on Pali grammar and gave five lectures on *Buddha, Dharma and Sangh* at different places in Baroda out of which three were published in book form.

In February 1910 I received a letter from Dr. Woods urgently inviting me to Harvard to help former Harvard professor Mr. Warren in his ongoing research on *Vishuddhimarg*. He had furnished all details of the ship journey and a password to withdraw the earmarked amount through wire transfer. Accordingly I withdrew 1800 rupees and got ready for the journey to America after I got the nod from Shrimant Maharaj. The Maharaj himself was scheduled to leave for America and he proposed that we travelled together. Since Dr. Woods had arranged everything including the money, I couldn't accept the Maharaj's offer and decided to travel via England as Dr. Woods had indicated. Shrimant Maharaj whole-heartedly conceded to my request and asked me to send a telegram if and when I needed any help during this visit. He also donated 500 rupees on the occasion as a token of appreciation for the three published books.

I never regretted my decision of having accepted Baroda state's 50 rupee salary leaving the coveted offer of 250 rupees behind. Had I not accepted the seemingly paltry salary, I would neither have met Dr. Woods nor got an opportunity to visit America. Having shifted to Pune, I came in regular contact with Dr. Bhandarkar who helped me enroll Pali language in the Mumbai University curriculum.

Thanks to Shrimant Gaikwad Maharaj's patronage, I could at least partly fulfil the desire to serve the fellowmen of my native state. Beyond doubt, he deserves most of the credit for the spread of the Pali language across Maharashtra.



18. VOYAGE TO AMERICA

For someone who spent the formative years of his life in a backward province like Gomantak and stayed at faraway *Mutts* and Vihars subsequently, an opportunity to visit America should surely count as an incredible occurrence. Completely oblivious of suited-booted attires or European table manners that I was, my readers can well imagine my anxiety on the eve of the journey. But given my rich and varied experience of exploring unknown lands and also having carefully observed the espoused European lifestyles of some of my Calcutta friends, I was confident I would cope with the occasion if not rise to it.

Dr. Sukhtankar taught at the Dayal Singh College in Lahore during that time. When he learnt of my American trip, he came to meet me at Pune. Since I was caught up with too many things at one time, he graciously proofread my book *Buddha, Dharma and Sangh* and prepared the final draft as well. He also handed me a laundry list of items recommended for the overseas journey and I bought these provisions with Shri Balwantrao Madgaonkar's help. Finally after bidding

goodbye to my family at Pune station, I left for Mumbai to board the P & O Company's Mantua ship headed for England on April 23, 1910. Balwantrao and a few other friends had come to see me off at the port. Maharaja Holkar was also travelling by this ship along with his sister Shrimant Mrs. Sitabai. I was not aware of this fact though it hardly mattered to me. But my friend from Prarthana Samaj Shri Vittal Ramji Shinde³² knew of their travel plans and he handed over a letter addressed to Shrimant Mrs. Sitabai requesting her to help me out in case I faced any problem on the ship. Dr. Sukhtankar had also intimated quite a few of his friends in England about my visit and Dr. Woods had asked a former archdeacon to arrange for my lodging and boarding in Liverpool.

In my second class cabin, there were two *Jain* (followers of Jainism) travellers, one was a student on his way to England and the other was a Paris-based diamond merchant. Many passengers suffer from sea-sickness on the first day on the

³² Committed and principled individual, after completing his BA from Fergusson College Pune, he devoted his whole energies to serve the larger cause of Prarthana Samaj, he later went to Oxford to learn comparative study of religion

ship but thanks to my prior experience, I didn't face any trouble. In fact, the fever and indigestion I suffered in Mumbai vanished in the Arabian Sea. Besides, the ship's simple diet of bread and butter was exactly to my liking. They served tea, fruits, biscuits or bread slices early morning. Breakfast was served at 10 and lunch at 1 pm. At 4 pm, there was a tea break followed by a sumptuous dinner at 7 pm. The day ended with supper at 10 pm. The Europeans relished this royal fare to the tee but I couldn't follow suit for the simple reason that I would have succumbed to colitis from the indulgence sooner or later. Save for a young Deshasht Brahmin, most of us Hindus had little portions of food twice or thrice a day. But the young Brahmin pounced on the ham and beef dishes as heartily as the Europeans. When I quizzed him about his unlikely gastronomical preferences, he told me victoriously, "My abroad trip was finalized three months back. With ample time at hand, I visited different hotels in Mumbai to develop a taste for this food." Needless to say, we were rendered speechless.

The *Jain* merchant of my cabin didn't eat the ship food save for tea, biscuits and bread. He had on his person enough provisions for his sustenance like Bhakris, dry fruits, sweets and fruit baskets filled with mangoes, oranges, sweet lime and

other fruits. The *Jain* student was not as staunch in his eating habits but dreaded the very sight of meat. Another *Jain* of surname Bapna was with us, Holkar Maharaj's teacher who was a pure vegetarian. I didn't mind eating fish but it was not available on board. Therefore we three had our meals together. After a couple of days, we requested the chief steward to prepare rice and dal for us. We quite relished the assorted diet of bread, butter, fruits, rice and dal.

As soon as ship entered the Red sea, I forwarded Shri Shinde's letter to Shrimant Sitabai through Shri Bapna. The next day I got her message asking me to meet her. Before our ship crossed the Mediterranean Sea I met her on one or two occasions. But since I detested frequenting the first class compartments, I avoided going there often. One day Mrs. Sitabai panicked a bit when a slight storm erupted in the Mediterranean Sea. Like me, she had a direct ticket to London but when someone told her even bigger cyclones grip the Bay of Biscay, she decided to change her ticket and travel via Marseille port. A special train had been arranged to move Maharaja Holkar's European guardian and other people from Marseille to Calais. One of them could have stayed behind to escort Sitabai to Calais. But I had no idea why that didn't happen. At Marseille, Sitabai

requested the guardian to get her ticket changed but he didn't allow her to proceed alone. On the spur, she put forth my name as her escort. The guardian checked with me if I was willing to take her responsibility. I replied, "I am a first timer but I can certainly help out to the extent possible." Left with no better option, he boarded the special train after instructing me to send a telegram in case of any trouble. Sitabai got my ticket changed too. Since this rearrangement happened on board, I got the opportunity to visit France for a day.

The day we disembarked at the Marseille port, we heard the news of King Edward's demise. Shrimant Sitabai and her daughter Indirabai had a lot of luggage on them. As the custom officials demanded a heavy octroi on their gold-plated saris, we had their luggage sealed and handed it over to Thomas Cook to be delivered at the destined location in England. I was told to collect my trunk from the Thomas Cook office at Liverpool. After having snacks in the town, the Thomas Cook officials took us on an excursion tour around Marseille. Sitabai had a lot of jewellery in her handbag and hence she was wary of leaving the bag at the entrance of museums and other places. I cautioned her, "Act normally or else others would get the hint."

After the sightseeing, we went to a restaurant for snacks. The Thomas Cook interpreter arranged for fresh pea curry and other refreshments and later dropped us to the station where another agent had been waiting for us. The agent in turn ushered us to the first class compartment. We had to shell out 10 to 20 francs at least to both the interpreter and the agent as tips. Like India, even France seems to have a culture of demanding tips from foreigners.

The French train service was far from convenient. Even our first class compartment barely had seating space. Among our co-passengers was a Muslim student who had excellent knowledge of the French routes. Thanks to his guidance, we were no longer at the mercy of the Thomas Cook agent for tourist information. We alighted at Paris the next day morning where we hired a cab to reach the station where we were to board the Calais-bound train. As our car passed through the streets of Paris, the Muslim student showed us many landmarks of Paris but we didn't have enough time to visit them. We had snacks at a hotel next to our station. The Muslim student didn't let me pay for the bill and despite my repeated protests, he settled it himself. I don't recollect when we alighted at Calais but I remember our Express train and Holkar Maharaj's special P & O train were scheduled

to reach there at the same time. Most probably Maharaj had already crossed the English Channel before us so we decided to catch up with him at Dover where we were to board the same train. At Dover, I ushered Sitabai and her daughter to their special compartment and then hopped into an adjacent compartment. Before that I briefly lost touch with my porter in the sea of people but fortunately he tracked me down. As he handed over my luggage to me, he asked to me check whether all was in order. I did the needful and paid him his wage.

I travelled alone till London's Charing Cross station. There I met a few Punjabi students and one of them was new to London like me. I spent the night at a hotel in Charing Cross in exchange of eighteen shillings. The next day I left for Liverpool to meet with the Archdeacon who was to help me undertake the onward journey to America. When I enquired about the address mentioned in the letter from Dr. Woods, I learnt the Archdeacon had passed away over a year back. One cabbie, sensing my predicament, suggested I ask the Bishop of Liverpool about the new Archdeacon. As soon as our car entered his porch, the Bishop himself stepped out and escorted me to the living room. After giving an ear to my tale, he spoke, "The Archdeacon is no more but let me

know if I can help you." I told him, "I would be grateful if you could suggest a suitable hotel for me. I hope you are aware we Hindus are vegetarians." He assured me, "Yes, I have read and heard a lot about you people and have great respect for your community. I feel the nearby Temperance Hotel would be ideal for you. If you face any trouble, let me know and I'll make some other arrangement." He escorted me to the car and instructed the driver to drop me at the Temperance Hotel. As we left for the hotel, the cabbie told me, "I am surprised to see the Bishop of this city extending such geniality." I told him, "Great people are known for their good nature." When we reached the Temperance Hotel, the cabbie went up to the manager and told him I had been sent by none other than the Bishop and that he should take good care of me. When I paid him his fare, he left calmly without a word.

On the ship, I had the company of many *Hindustani* people and also spent a lot of time reading. But at the hotel, I had little to do. My books had been couriered to the Thomas Cook office along with the luggage. When I checked with the office, they informed me that my luggage was yet to arrive. None of the hotel lobby magazines interested me while the newspapers mostly carried reports of King Edwards'

demise. Being in an unfamiliar region, I couldn't even go out for a stroll. In short, I felt like a hostage in the hotel.

On the third or fourth day, a gentleman asked me in the hotel foyer, "Where do you come from?" I was pleasantly surprised to find someone in England who took the initiative to break the ice. But further interaction revealed that he was not English but a Dutch merchant who was also killing time in Liverpool till some of his documents arrived from Brussels. In line with the norm of 'Those of similar temperament bond well in the face of hardship', we developed instant rapport. He took me to quite a few landmarks and popular restaurants in Liverpool. At the Temperance Hotel, it was mandatory to have lunch at the hotel restaurant. But there was no such compulsion for snacks and dinner. So we often dined at some of the inexpensive restaurants outside.

Karl Marx Who?

One day my Dutch friend casually told me, "English people are generally very rich but there's enough poverty in England. The working class has to suffer a lot here. I belong to the trading class but I agree with the thoughts of Karl Marx." I asked him, "Who is Karl Marx?" Surprised at my question,

he replied, "Oh! You haven't heard of Karl Marx. He's the founder of modern socialism. Even Englishmen like Ker and Hardy are his followers." I asked, "What is socialism? We don't have any such movement in Hindustan."

He replied, "Spend a few weeks in Europe and you'll know automatically. But if you wish, I'll get you a few good books right away. In a mere five-six pence, you'll know enough on the subject." He took me to a bookshop nearby and bought a few books by Blatchford. Of them, I loved the book 'Merrie England' which cost a mere three pence. Having read it twice, I was motivated to know more about socialism. As a result I studied a lot of books while in America including the biography of Max by John Spargo.

Dr. Woods had booked my ticket in the Leyland ship that left directly for Boston. But I missed the ship on the day of my arrival in Liverpool and hence had to wait for more than a week for the next ship to Boston. After my Dutch companion moved to some other hotel, I decided to spend some time at Manchester. Leaving most of my luggage at the Temperance, I boarded a train to Manchester. Dr. Sukhtankar had informed his father-in-law Revrand Bishop about my visit and I also had a letter from Mrs. Sukhtankar addressed to her father.

At the station, I took a tram and reached Revrand Bishop's home. As his place was quite far away, he was surprised that I located his place without much hassle. He welcomed me warmly and took me on a whirlwind tour around Manchester in a single day.

The next day he took me to the principal of Unitarian college. When Revrand Bishop informed him that I was headed to America for research on the Pali language, he croaked with contempt, "I don't understand why the Americans are interested in the languages of these savage people." Soon lunch was served and when the principal learnt that I was a vegetarian, he again said with utmost disregard, "We have no use for grass eaters like you." I was extremely upset with his unruly behaviour. When a student seated next to me tried to comfort me, I told him in a tone loud enough to be heard by the principal, "If this is how a principal of a religious institution conducts himself, one can imagine how the English officials must be treating the ordinary subjects of England. We may have endured such insensitivity in the bygone decade but the younger generation in Hindustan won't tolerate this discrimination. If the English people feel they become superior by relentlessly despising the Hindu populace, they are sadly mistaken."

He seemed to have mellowed down after lunch and even asked me softly, "Is there anything I can do for you?" I replied, "I don't expect any help from you. Had Revrand Bishop not insisted, I wouldn't have come to your place. As I am his guest, I was forced to bother you." After some casual conversation, we took his leave. The principal followed us to the college gate and shook hands with me.

I was in Manchester for a couple of days more but not at Revrand Bishop's place. He helped me shift to a rented place of his acquaintance. From there I went to Lethem, forty miles from Manchester to the home of Shri Ramchandra Vishnu Madgaonkar. (Balwantrao's father) I was at his place for a few days after which I returned directly to Liverpool. In a couple of days, I embarked the Leyland Company's *Devonion* ship to Boston at the appointed hour.

During May-June, a lot of people from America travel to Europe but there are very tourists from Europe visiting America. Dr. Woods had booked the best cabin for me with three large berths but I was the only occupant. The sea was unbelievably calm and it felt as if we were passing by a large lake. A thick layer of fog however engulfed the horizon as we inched closer to our destination. The imposing sound of fog-

horns often woke me up in the night even as the sailing ships signalled their presence to each other in the murky weather. But after a couple of days, I got used to the noise.

As we neared the Boston shores, a wireless telegraph officer seemed to befriend me in rather unusual fashion throwing a volley of questions at me: 'Where am I headed', 'Where do I come from' and the like. When our ship dropped anchor at the Boston port, our steward announced the arrival of custom officials. I was packing my bags when the chief official asked me, "Do you have 50 dollars on you?" I told him, 'I have 80 and if you wish more, my friend can fetch them for you.'

Taken aback by my curt reply, he said, "Please don't mind my intrusion. I was only following the rules. You don't have to show the dollars. I trust you." I disembarked and waited for Dr. Woods on the port. He arrived in five-ten minutes but before I could speak to him, a couple of newspaper correspondents surrounded me and asked, "Are you the *Hindustani* invited by the Harvard University?" I presumed Dr. Woods would have informed them about me but when I asked him, he replied, "These correspondents never approached me and even if they had, I wouldn't have entertained them. But most

of yesterday's newspapers have carried your news. You should count yourself fortunate that they didn't publish your fictitious photograph alongside your name." Now I knew why the wireless telegraph officer was so deeply interested in me. I directed the correspondents to Dr. Woods and rescued myself from the ordeal. Dr. Woods spoke to them briefly and bid them off but not before they jotted down my address.

Handing over my luggage to an Express company, (There are several Express companies in America delivering baggage to desired locations. Huge consignments are delivered only through them) Dr. Woods took me to the Harvard Union Club.

I was put up here for about five days after which I was abruptly shifted to a small room in Warren House following a confab between Dr. Woods and Prof. Lanman. This room was actually a cubbyhole and I detested staying there. As a result, Dr. Woods transferred me to a spacious room in Feston Hall. The rent was 60 rupees per month.

Having settled at the new place, I began the work on *Vishuddhimarg* with Prof. Lanman. He didn't acknowledge my help during the initial weeks. He was even reluctant to reimburse my expenses from the Warren Fund, Dr. Woods told

me later. But when he realised the value of my contribution, he sanctioned an annual allowance of 800 dollars for my overheads. I sent home 60 rupees every month to support my family in Pune. After deducting my room rent and other incidentals, I was hardly left with any savings but I somehow managed the tight rope walk for almost ten months.

Tiff with Prof. Lanman

As soon as I was through with the editing of *Vishuddhimarg*, I repeatedly told Dr. Woods that I didn't wish to stay at Harvard any longer. He was well aware that I was not happy with Prof Lanman and yet he wanted me to stay put. Rather than directly broaching the subject, he asked a Japanese gentleman called Mr. Okakura to speak on his behalf. Okakura was the chief officer of the Oriental section of Boston Museum and we had mutual respect for each other. He had a soft corner for Asians and Buddhists and I happened to be both. When he tried to persuade me to continue my Harvard spell on Dr. Woods's insistence, I told him my version of the story. He was deeply pained to know the truth and felt I should have insisted on a proper contract before leaving Hindustan. He finally said, "You obviously can't change the past but given Prof. Lanman's transgression, I feel you should go back

home. I'll make arrangements to fund your research work. If you wish, I can report the matter to the University president."

I didn't wish to escalate the matter in this fashion but taking Mr. Okakura's other advice; I confronted Prof. Lanman one day and insisted on a contract to formalize my engagement. He was visibly enraged but subsequently signed the said contract which entitled me to a monthly stipend of 500 rupees with retrospective effect. I unexpectedly had 700 to 800 dollars in my hand which I immediately deposited in a bank. Henceforward my salary was legitimately remitted by the University bursar every month.

The next issue was of ensuing authorship credit as the joint editor of the *Vishuddhimarg* along with Prof. Lanman. Okakura felt I should settle this matter at the time of enforcing the contract itself. But I was more than sure that Prof. Lanman wouldn't have relented at any cost and worse wouldn't have signed the contract too. So I let the matter linger only till the work was in progress. But when Prof. Lanman said that he intended to publish his name as the editor with an acknowledgment of Warren's draft and my assistance, I vehemently opposed him. I told, "This won't be fair to Warren's herculean effort and his generosity to set up the Warren fund for the purpose which

has in turn sponsored all my overheads. Let's either publish the book in the name of the trio Warren-Lanman-Kosambi or let Warren remain the exclusive editor with due mention of our revisions." As expected, Lanman didn't concur with my view and retorted with abuses.

I vowed never to meet Lanman ever again. Before he could spell further nuisance, I narrated the whole incident to Dr. Woods. He had already booked my return ticket to Mumbai on the *Hamburg* ship that was scheduled to depart on January 4. But in the light of my recent brawl with Prof. Lanman, he suggested I move to New York for the remainder of my stay to keep away from potential trouble. I didn't like the idea for I wished to meet many friends in Cambridge in the given time. I told him, "If Lanman seeks revenge, let him do so. I won't flee to New York. That would be sheer cowardice."

I stayed put at Cambridge till the date of my departure, meeting friends, making acquaintances and packing my luggage. In the meantime I got a couple of invitation letters from Lanman. But I didn't even open them lest there could some distress brewing in them. He invited me for lunch some time later but I sent him a message that I wouldn't come unless accompanied by Dr. Woods. Once or twice he came

to my room but our conversation was brief and matter of fact. Just four days prior to my travel, I left Cambridge for New York for a tour around the landmarks of the place. Dr. Woods had arranged for my accommodation in the Harvard Club. A Harvard student named Weisbuch had his father and brother settled in New York. They came to receive me at the station following his intimation of my New York visit and took turns to show me around the city.

One of my visits, chaperoned by Mr. Weisbuch, was to the Hippodrome theatre which featured lavish spectacles from the world over like the royal processions and monuments of India and the private chambers of Turkish Sultans. After a visit to many other places in New York, I finally boarded the *Hamburg* ship on the appointed day.

My American routine

I would like to briefly describe my daily schedule while I was in America. At the Feston Hall, I had food in European style – three meals and two tea breaks every day. As most of the available food was non-vegetarian, I survived on boiled potatoes, bread and butter. This cost me around 16 dollars (48 rupees) every month and hence I began exploring other

cost-effective options. A Chinese student suggested a better option, that of sourcing provisions at reasonable prices from the local grocer who made the delivery to one's doorstep. Accordingly I ordered shredded wheat at home as also one quart milk daily from a dairy owned by Mr. Warren's sister.

Every morning I had shredded wheat biscuits and cold milk for breakfast. From 8.30 am to 12.30 pm, I worked in Prof. Lanman's library. I returned to my chamber in the afternoon to have a glass of milk after which I engaged in some physical exercise. During hot days, I went for rowing but when it was chilly; I preferred to work out in the gym. I deliberately went to the boat club in the afternoon to enjoy a discrete shower in the large-sized common bathroom after my exercise. At other times several people took bath at the same time and completely nude at that. I was not comfortable with this arrangement given my conventional upbringing. Secondly, securing a boat for rowing was a cakewalk at noon as invariably I was the only one around at that odd hour. At the gymkhana, bath posed no problem as I was allowed to access the rest rooms reserved for professors. But there again, I preferred to work out in the afternoon as I could use most of the equipment without any hassle. After exercise I often had fruit bread and cocoa at some tea shop on the

way and spent most evenings reading at the Harvard library or at home. At night, I mostly worked on the *Vishuddhimarg* text.

Sundays were an exception to this routine. Like most Americans, I used to wake up late, at around seven, and then proceed to Prof. Lanman's house where we worked till about 11 am. After that I went to some chapel like Appleton to listen to the sermons. This Harvard University Chapel is secular in character and open to people of all castes and creeds. Even Jewish rabbis are invited for discourses. I heard a lot of sermons from several renowned speakers. During vacation time, when there were hardly any sermons amidst the routine stuff, I went to other churches and also attended lectures at various institutes in Boston. If one Sunday was spent in attending a rationalist association lecture, the other would be devoted to a Socialist association discourse. Often I attended 2 to 3 lectures on the same day.

The principle subject of my extra-curricular study was social science. I read several books on the topic and it won't be an exaggeration to state that my interest soon became an obsession. Consequently I wrote in Marathi magazines like *Subodh Patrika* and *Sudharak* about adopting the co-

operative movement to improve the dismal condition of India's working class. I was well aware of the fact that our nation didn't subscribe to the culture of implementing thoughts into concrete action nor was I capable of bringing about a drastic change for the better, but the mere thought of helping my countrymen progress through proper education and awareness of the higher echelons of spiritual and moral fulfilment made me happy and oblivious of my regrets.

I would say the biggest takeaway of my American visit has been my growing interest in social sciences. Had I never crossed the seven seas, I would have been remained absorbed in religious thought thereby overlooking the principle 'The physical body is the prime contraption of spiritual contemplation' The American exposure helped me introspect on the principle and also grasp the studied opinion of Western scholars. Not that I was completely taken over by this principle or the one which states 'Food is critical to existence' but I now gave these ideologies the due respect they deserved. I still believe human progression is impossible without religious advancement but at the same time I feel it is

futile to expect spiritual liberation through physical starvation and severities.

Through the diligent practice of Yoga - regulation in matters of food, sleep, recreation and work - one can overcome all material miseries (Bhagwad Gita)

This norm should be applied to society as a whole. At the same time, it shouldn't be forgotten than human progress is only a function of circumstances as the Marathi proverb implies:

You make the bazaar your home and yet stake a claim to chasteness

A labourer working for sheer survival in the most dismal conditions would always remain incapable of making spiritual progress unless he's moved to a more conducive environment where his basic needs are better addressed. Only then will he be able to ascend higher on the path of spiritual enlightenment, free of evils like alcoholism that his environment has circuitously thrust on him.



When it's about money..



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