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*Jyotirmoyee Debir Rachana Sankalan*, 5 vols  
(Complete Works of Jyotirmoyee Devi, 5 vols)

SHORT STORIES

*Sona Rupa Noy* (Rabindra Puraskar, 1973)

*Moner Agochore*

*Rajgotak*

*Araballir Arale*

*Bandmasterer Ma*

*Araballir Kahini*

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POETRY

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NOVELS

*Chhayapath*

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*Epar Ganga Opar Ganga*

(*The River Churning*, English translation)

*Pinjrapal* (Hindi translation)

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NONFICTION

*Samay O Sukriti*

*Harijan Unnayan Katha*

*Smriti Bismriti Taranga*

*Panchanadir Teere*

## The Impermanence of Lies

Stories by Jyotirmoyee Devi



Translated from the original Bengali

Introduction by Mahasweta Devi



THE IMPERMANENCE OF LIES:  
Stories by Jyotirmoyee Devi  
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## A Note by the Author's Family

Jyotirmoyee Devi was born in the princely state of Jaipur on 23 January 1894 to Abhinash Chandra Sen and Sarala Devi. The Sens had settled in Jaipur for about fifty years by then, leaving Agra for Jaipur at the time of the Great Revolt of 1857. The founder of their fortunes in Jaipur, Sansar Chandra Sen, Jyotirmoyee Devi's grandfather, had risen from the modest background of being the headmaster of the local school to the post of the Dewan (prime minister) of the maharaja. In appreciation of his services the prince made him a jagirdar and bestowed the title of Sardar-i-riyasat on him. Of his three sons, the eldest, Abhinash Chandra, inherited the jagir and also served as a minister. Abhinash Chandra and his wife, Sarala Devi, had ten children; Jyotirmoyee was their second daughter.

Jyotirmoyee Devi never went to school but was taught some rudimentary reading and writing and arithmetic. She was taught Bengali and Hindi by tutors at home. She also spent a lot of time in her grandfather's library, which had a large collection of Bengali classics and stocked the important literary periodicals of the time: *Bharati*, *Pradeep*, *Prabasi*, and so on. At the age of ten, she was married to Kiran Chandra Sen of Guptipara, Hugli District, West Bengal, who was a lawyer in Patna. Leaving her privileged home, Jyotirmoyee Devi spent thirteen years with her husband and his parents before his untimely death at the age of thirty-seven. He succumbed to the influenza epidemic that swept through the world at the end of World War I, which killed more people than the war.

Kiran Chandra had encouraged his wife to learn English and helped her to acquire literary magazines and books. They were a part of the Bengali community that kept in touch with the literary events of Bengal. Jyotirmoyee Devi recalled a visit of Sarala Devi Choudhurani<sup>1</sup> in 1912 at the invitation of a literary society. The only story that Jyotirmoyee Devi wrote during these years was written at the request of some younger neighbours who had started a handwritten literary magazine for private circulation. Widowhood at the age of twenty-five changed her life forever. She had six children, the youngest was a few months old, the eldest about ten years old. She was to write in her *Atmajibani*<sup>2</sup> that 'this sorrow was not just one of separation . . . It seemed as if I'd been

reborn—in a world of cast-offs or the shudras'. All her life she was to observe the harsh ascetic routine of the upper caste Hindu widow, fulfilling every orthodox expectation. She returned to her paternal family where her parents took her and her children under their protective wings. She had had to leave her third daughter, Anubha, then four, with her grieving parents-in-law. Soon she had to face the loss of her father who died prematurely. At his death, she and her six children were looked after by the eldest of her brothers, Dhritindra Nath Sen, who became the head of the household. He inherited his father's jagir and was the accountant general of the state. Jyotirmoyee Devi wrote that though enveloped with affection by her brother and his wife, Shantimoyee Devi, she felt that she 'did not have roots in the soil anywhere . . .

I discovered the old infatuation of my childhood and youth in my favourite pastime, reading'. She said that she would read Rabindranath Tagore, and that the 'little poems of Priyambada Devi had also grown to be my most favourites'.<sup>3</sup> A granduncle handed her John Stuart Mill's *On the Subjection of Women*. She remembered the book from her reading of Bankimchandra's *Samya*, which she had been able to get hold of in Patna. She found that many questions surfaced; she had not known these were lurking in her mind. She remembered asking the granduncle that 'if marriage was women's only source of livelihood, then why shouldn't she have any right to select the person who would be the provider?' Throughout her life she argued for women's rights. As a parent she made no difference to the ways she treated her daughters and her sons. She insisted that her daughters receive the same educational opportunities.

It was at this time that she started to write: 'the thoughts escaped before I could pen them down.' One of her father's uncles was Subodh Chandra Majumdar who also worked for the maharaja. Subodh Chandra was a writer who encouraged Jyotirmoyee Devi to write too. His criticism was gentle and Jyotirmoyee Devi valued it. As she says, 'Our problem was that we did not have the convenience of showing our writings to anyone, or have them read or corrected by anyone.'

Jyotirmoyee Devi characterized herself as a *nanasthani*, a nomad. She was a perpetual traveller between the homes of her brothers at Jaipur and at Hathibagan, Calcutta, her parent's-in-law at Hugli, her cousin at Delhi and later her daughter Anjali at Shibpur. She would also spend time at Benares and lived among the

Bengali widows. Perhaps it was her nomadic life that intensified the detachment that is reflected in her art.

She grew as a writer at Calcutta where her third brother, Abhaya Pada, and his wife, Kanakbala, headed a household that was open to all the members of the joint family who needed to be in the city. The poet Kantichandra Ghosh helped her to get her essay 'The Point of View of Women' and a poem, 'Smaran', published in *Bharatvarsha* in 1921, the year when her eldest daughter, Amiya, was married. She was to die of cholera, aged nineteen, a blow from which her mother perhaps never recovered. Some eight years later Jyotirmoyee Devi's first short story was published in *Prabasi*. She wrote because of the inner need to express herself, and she found time in between her household chores and the rigid purity rituals that ordered her life.

Gradually her stories, poems, essays—mostly on the lives and problems of women of Bengal, Rajasthan, Punjab—became a regular feature of the literary magazines published from Calcutta. Ashoka Gupta spoke of her pleasure in accompanying her mother to literary conferences and events, of her mother's close attachment to Anindita Devi.<sup>4</sup> She was also acquainted with the writer Kedarnath Bandopadhyay (Dadamashai) of Purnea and Benares. She knew Suresh Chakrabarti who edited the journal *Uttara* to which she was a contributor and with Prabodh Sanyal who was responsible for the publication of *Chhayapath*, her first novel, through Gurudas Chattopadhyay and Sons.

As Jyotirmoyee Devi's children grew up, they came to appreciate and support her literary interests. Her sons, Arun Chandra Sen and Amitabha Sen, her daughters, Ashoka Gupta, Anubha Mitra and Anjali Chatterjee, and her grandson Bikash Roy—Amiya's son—put together the fund required to publish *Sona Rupa Noy*, the collection of short stories that won the Rabindra Puraskar in 1973. Her son-in-law Goshtha Bihari Chatterjee published several of her books including the remarkable *Atmajibani* (Autobiography).

A book that she had chanced to come across in the early years of her widowhood was Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. It was to influence her tremendously. She would often speak of the freedom that such a 'room' symbolized for a woman. Finally, at the end of her life, she built a tiny house for herself within the compound of the Hathibagan house. She breathed her last there.

NOTES

1. Writer and editor (1872-1945), the daughter of Swarnakumari Devi and a niece of Rabindranath Tagore. She was the editor of *Bharati*. An early nationalist and a supporter of women's rights, she was the first to popularize athletics for women.
2. Published in *Jyotirmoyee Debir Rachana Sankalan*, vol 2 (Dey's Publishing). All quotations have been translated from this piece.
3. Poet and critic (1871-1935) of a fine sensibility, her work was much appreciated by Rabindranath Tagore and the art historian Okakura Kakuzo.
4. A writer (1881-1940) who wielded great influence over her contemporaries, with a reputation for erudition and brilliance; a contributor to the major literary journals of her time--*Bharati*, *Bijoli*, *Joyshree* and *Uttara*. She fought for women's rights and economic independence.

INTRODUCTION



JYOTIRMOYEE DEVI  
IN THE LIGHT OF A HUNDRED YEARS

In my youth, in the magazine *Prabasi*, I chanced to read the story 'Putreshti' (translated here as 'A Yajna to Bring Forth Sons') which made a deep impression on me. The subject of the story was the efforts of a childless couple to have a son by performing the *putreshti* ceremony. It was a cruel story, told in a tone of hard realism.

Many years later, I met the author myself at Mrs Ashoka Gupta's house; I was astonished to learn that Jyotirmoyee Devi was her mother. By then I had read *Sona Rupa Noy* in an early edition, and *Aravallir Arale*, and was an enthusiastic admirer of her work. From this meeting grew a scheme which was put in hand by Chitra Ghosh and Shyamasree Lal. With the help of *Shahityika* and the University Women's Association we organized a lavish tribute to six established Bengali women authors at the Rabindra Sadan in November 1972. *Jugantar* and *Ananda Bazar Patrika* advertized the gathering on their front pages for a month in advance, Lila Mazumdar took care of the operations with all the strictness of an army commander, and the venue was packed to capacity on the day. No one was specially invited, but those who came comprised most of Calcutta's living great writers. The writers feted were Jyotirmoyee Devi, Giribala Devi, Sita Devi, Shanta Devi, Shailabala Ghoshjaya and Punyalata Chakravarty. This event was the first of its kind where so many accomplished women writers were granted long-overdue recognition.

The names of the novelists Aparajita Devi, Radharani Devi, Ashalata Singha, Jyotirmala Devi, the poet Uma Devi and the later writers Savitri Rai and Sulekha Sanyal come to mind as writers whom we did not laud in time. It is easy to forget to do so until it is too late. Anurupa Devi, Nirupama Devi, Prabhavati Devi Saraswati, Hashirashi Devi, and many more could be named here.

Jyotirmoyee Devi stands out in particular for the very modern quality of her writing. She was born in 1894 and was married early on. She lost her husband while still a young woman, and was required to observe all the customary rules governing a widow's

existence. This she did without a murmur, but she did not allow the traditional demureness of her life to fetter her mind. When I saw her reading Bergson's essays, or raising some point about Ibsen's *Nora* or the Hindu Code Bill, I would ask her how I could reconcile this with 'Eating radishes in January is forbidden'. But the object of my question would only smile.

As a writer, she is worthy of remembrance and respect. The most striking aspect of her writing is the way in which it appeals not merely to the emotions, but to the reader's intellect and moral sense as well. Furthermore, she is one of Bengal's best serial writers.

Born in 1894, she was married around 1904. Her first child was born in 1909, and she was widowed nine years later, when her youngest child was three months old. In 1972, having lived as a widow for fifty-four years, she still remembered every detail of her short married life. She would amaze me with the deep feeling with which she would speak of her late husband. I believe that episode of her life was something she kept locked up behind invisible walls, and treasured as a thing uniquely hers. Her husband's love had been given to her as a personal gift; after his death she had to let society order much of her identity, in so many things. But she was fully aware of the moral calculus of patriarchy operating behind the petty rules and regulations which circumscribed her, the duties that had been imposed upon her. At first through reading, and later, through writing, she sought liberation for her mind. The grim realities of her own life taught her the necessity for education and economic independence for women. Even in later life she could not speak of her elder daughter, who died young, without hesitation. Hence she was all the more resolved that Ashokadi and her sisters should be well educated and able to support themselves with pride and freedom in society. Ashokadi's marriage is also worth mentioning in this context. I learnt from Mr Saibal Gupta himself that before he met Ashokadi he had already become an admirer of her mother's writing, its deep vision and trenchant social criticism. I do not know if any other pair of hard-working people have ever married because of a mother-in-law's talent with the pen.

Jyotirmoyee Devi has written of her thoughtful, literature-loving readers. She has also written of the wrongs done to women under the patriarchal value-system which prevails in India, but she has never declared war on the race of men because of this.

When she speaks of Kantichandra Ghosh, or Kaki Abdul Wadud or Anindita Devi, she deals only with the writer, the critic and the thinker in them. She is not concerned with personalities or gender. Both in her writing and in her life she is free from all such restraints of vision. She is first and foremost a litterateur, of whom I feel when I read stories like '*Dar O Dastur*' ('Market Values') or '*Jabala*' (not in this collection), that she sees that both men and women are victims under patriarchy. The father in the first story, and Nani Dutta in the second, are both ordinary, sensitive people. But whatever the character of individual men, it is the women who ultimately have to pay the price exacted by society. It is society and its set of rules that she indicts, as if she is smiling through great but patiently borne suffering, and saying, look, this society is senseless, stagnant, and serves no one's need. Her message is not shouted out, but put before the reader in a well-reasoned, carefully unfolded argument.

In her life she valued highly the friendship of another like-minded woman, Anindita Devi, who wrote essays under the nom-de-plume of '*Banganari*'; some of these were published in a collection titled *Agamani*. These two women, the invalid and house-bound Anindita Devi and Jyotirmoyee Devi herself, both Indians, both Bengalis, wrote such reasoned, logical and informed essays and stories that I have not seen anywhere else. In truth, educated women of that age (albeit not instructed in schools or colleges), confined to a small domestic world, were able to see clearly the pattern of oppression and deprivation which women suffered. Much of this vision found expression in the pages of magazines like *Prabasi*.

Both these writers were fortunate in that their families encouraged them to educate themselves and pursue literature. Anindita Devi received such support from both her own family and her husband's, and Jyotirmoyee Devi was even encouraged in later life to learn English. Her enthusiasm for books and ideas was always boundless. Through books, she was able to familiarize herself with the literature of the West. I wonder if today's women writers train themselves quite so extensively, reading without prejudice epics, scriptures, bhajans, *dohas*, the Koran, and many Bengali and English essays. Jyotirmoyee Devi also kept in touch with current affairs; she read newspapers regularly, and was interested in politics and the affairs of the nation. She had great respect for Mahatma Gandhi, but as her book *Harijan Unnayani*

*Katha* (On the Uplift of the Harijans) will show, it was not blind admiration.

She cannot be considered solely a Bengali writer, but an Indian one. I use this term not merely because she wrote about states and cultures other than that of Bengal, but because she undertook a heavier and more onerous task. She not only gives us a minutely detailed picture of a different culture, but also shows us what elements within it transcend the boundaries which define 'difference' and become universal. Such writing can be found, for example, in the story '*Shey Meyeti*', about a singer of devotional songs, or in '*Beti ka Baap*' ('The Remedy'), a story involving an issue which is still very much current today. She has other stories about female infanticide, stories which we would do well to heed in these days of selective abortion and the systematic neglect of girl children. Why just 'Behind the Aravallis', as one of her stories is titled — where in India today are girl children not sold, as a usual and everyday practice, either openly or through a pretence of marriage, as the Muslim girls are in '*Sangbad*'? Women are stolen routinely to stock the many brothels that flourish in our cities. Her stories set in Rajasthan are relevant anywhere in India, because the inhuman and callous values that cause their tragedies poison every culture among us. Whatever Indian society has given women, it has not given them the right to live their own lives with dignity.

Jyotirmoyee Devi crosses the battle lines at other places too. In the story '*Shey Chheleta*' ('The Little Beggar Boy') Raj's mother is at one and the same time a Punjabi woman violated by history and an image of innumerable women in similar predicaments, down the ages. She has also written trenchantly of Hindu society's treatment of widows and other 'untouchables' in *Harijan Unmayani Katha*.

In '*Epar Ganga Opar Ganga*' (*The River Churning*, Kali for Women, 1995) Sutara becomes an outcast because she is touched by a Muslim; the fact that this person saves her life is completely overlooked. In many stories Jyotirmoyee Devi shows again and again how in times of war, and especially during Partition, as well as in times of peace, it is the women who bear the brunt of the punishment.

Another great quality of her writing is her substantiation of all she writes, her straightforward realism. She never prescribes a remedy, but describes what is, with great penetration, simplicity

and truth. The reader is led into thinking about the characters' predicament, of seeing that there are no ready solutions. That is what Jyotirmoyee Devi wants from her audience. In '*Agachha*' Phela leaves Monor Ma's body and goes away. In '*Aravallir Arale*' Dhapi fails to wake one morning. In '*Karna-Kunti Katha*' ('The Impermanence of Lies') the son becomes his mother's judge. In all this, Jyotirmoyee Devi's role is like that of an epic narrator: she merely records what happens, and lets the reader draw his or her own conclusions.

The dowry system, injustice to widows, society's attitude to prostitution, the denying of women their rights in the home, these issues come up again and again in her work. Moreover, as she shows us, it is this pitiful state which women are conditioned to call 'happiness', or their rightful lot. All this together makes up the oeuvre of Jyotirmoyee Devi. Today she is as current as ever, for we find in her stories issues like divorce, inter-caste marriage, the rights of Hindu women. In everything her sense of social duty was foremost.

I, like many others, am a reader of limited intelligence with many demands. I expect a lot from literature: I expect a writer to make me think, and get me interested in the subject of his or her writing. Jyotirmoyee Devi fulfils those expectations. Though her own first-hand experience of the world was limited, she managed through others to extend her own perceptions very widely. As a person she shared many of my own attitudes and beliefs. When her children had grown up somewhat, she took to travelling wherever her interest took her. Her pilgrimages were not undertaken merely for the sake of arriving, but were also journeys in their own right. She was not a home-staying, circumscribed person, ruled by convention, but a woman who believed in exercising her freedom. I have seen this in the conversation of both her and her daughter.

She was also alive to the absurd side of orthodox Hinduism. Anyone who has read the description of the Maharaja of Jaipur travelling to Britain accompanied by Ganga water, cows and cow dung and all the paraphernalia of Hindu purification can see that. But for myself I must admit that it is her fiction that I prize most. Another cruel story on the lines of '*Putreshti*' is about a Brahmin who had no son, and therefore conducts his own shraddha. As a result he finds himself in the uncomfortable position of being officially dead to his friends and relations.

Jyotirmoyee Devi's modernity will stand comparison with the work of today's writers. Now, writing the introduction to this collection, I wonder if I have done it well. If she was here she would smile a little, and forgive me my faults.

MAHASWETA DEVI

As requested by Mahasweta Devi, translated from the original 'Jyotirmoyee Devi : Shatbarsher Alotey' that appeared in *Jyotirmoyee Debir Rachana - Sankalan*, vol. 2 (Dey's Publishing, 1994); translated by Rimi Chatterjee.

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## THE IMPERMANENCE OF LIES

Sudeb Sarkar had always been a bright student, so it was not a surprise when he sailed through the final qualifying examination of the medical college at the top of the merit list. What counted far more to Sudeb than his personal satisfaction in his success was how happy and proud his mother and uncle were in this, his crowning achievement.

In due course he began his internship in a hospital and was very soon making a name for himself. As it usually happens, proposals for his marriage came pouring in from many quarters. Photographs of eligible girls began piling up; of pretty, well-educated girls, of uneducated girls whose fathers had lots of money, of the sole heiresses of great businessmen. Proposals came by mail and by word of mouth, as hopeful parents came and went. Sudeb was not interested in marriage, not yet. He told his uncle, 'Not now, uncle. Let me go to England for higher studies.'

Neither his mother nor his uncle put any pressure on Sudeb to marry immediately, nor did they discourage him when he talked of going abroad. To the outside world this apparent indifference of his mother and uncle to Sudeb's marriage seemed unnatural.

Sudeb and his family now rapidly became the target of comments and remarks. People said, Sudeb was surely more than adequately qualified. If he wished to go abroad to study, why couldn't he get married first? And was not Sudeb, the only child in the family, the sole heir to the fortune? Had not Tarak Sarkar, his uncle, made a pile in his paper business? And capping it all was the mother's strange attitude. She was getting on in years, did she not wish to see her only son settle down in life, did she not wish to enjoy the company of grandchildren while she could? Tarak too had no one to take over from him, why was he so reluctant to do anything? All this would end in the young man's coming home with a foreign wife, and that would teach them! But the subjects of all this took no heed, assuming any of it reached their ears in the first place.

Sudeb eventually did set sail for England, and returned, confounding all prophets of disaster, without a foreign wife. And this sparked off a new onslaught of marriage proposals. A few of them now approached Sudeb directly, suspecting lack of interest on the part of his uncle and hoping that they might win through by charming Sudeb with the unmatched looks and attainments of their daughters. Sudeb took scant interest in these proposals; the letters remained mostly unopened. Only occasionally his friends read through some of them for a laugh, and scanned some of the photographs. Then one day, on looking at a particular picture, his friends stopped in their tracks. Instead of indulging in their usual badinage, they were struck speechless. This one was indeed a beauty in every sense and if she were fair of complexion then she would be matchless. Her face, according to Sudeb's friends, had the undefinable qualities of aristocracy. Our young doctor was also suitably impressed.

His friends then read the letter from the father of the girl. The family were of decent background though not exactly wealthy and the girl was well educated. The father had modestly added that he did not wish to sing the praises of his daughter's looks, but that Sudeb and his family could see for themselves. Sudeb wrote back asking the father to get in touch with his uncle. If he and his mother approved of the proposal, he would be happy to accept their decision.

Some days later, one evening, the uncle asked Sudeb to see him. It was not uncommon for Sudeb and his uncle to spend the evening together, chatting after dinner; they found little time during the day. Sudeb went to his uncle's room. To his surprise, his uncle got up and closed the door. Then he said, 'Sit down.' His manner was a little worried and distracted.

He picked up a photograph and said, 'I believe you have told the father of this girl that you are not opposed to this marriage proposal?' Sudeb was somewhat disconcerted by his uncle's grave manner; the unexpected locking of the door had already made him uneasy.

'That's right; I did ask the father to contact you,' he confirmed. Then he asked with some misgiving, 'Is it that you don't approve of it?'

The uncle pondered for a while before he replied, 'No not exactly, but I don't think this marriage is possible.'

This was an unexpected jolt. Not possible? Why? What could



be wrong? He was nonplussed, but could not bring himself to ask his uncle straight out what precisely was the problem. All this while the uncle was pointlessly fidgeting with some papers and then he suddenly declared, 'This girl happens to be a Kayastha by caste.'

Now Sudeb was thoroughly confused. Kayastha? Was not his family also Kayastha? Then what was the difficulty? Had uncle taken leave of his senses? Sudeb wondered.

There were more surprises in store for Sudeb who was taken completely off guard by the next announcement of his uncle's. 'You were born a Brahmin.'

A bolt from the blue is an old cliché but Sudeb never had any personal experience of it until this moment. He did not know what to say and only looked at his uncle with questioning eyes.

'Your father was Sasankamohan Chakravarty and your grandfather Suryamohan Chakravarty,' the uncle added, 'I found you and your mother abandoned on the streets.'

Abandoned on the streets? This was too much for Sudeb to take in. He opened his mouth to speak but his voice failed him.

'This is how it all happened,' the uncle continued. 'You must be about thirty now, so this must have taken place nearly twenty seven years ago. I was myself then around thirty-five or thirty-six years of age. I was returning home one winter evening when I noticed a young woman in a plain white sari, a thinly dressed child with her, sitting on a corner of my front porch. It was early in December, somewhat cold, the sky was overcast with the Calcutta smog lying low. I did not pay much attention to them, I went in and got on with some work. After an hour or so I had to go out again, when I found the woman still waiting there with the child. I became a little worried that she was sick, so I asked her, "What are you doing here? Why don't you going home?"'

'The woman stood up, drawing her sari closely around her, holding the child's hand. For the first time I saw her face in the street lights. I was surprised to discover she was not a beggar, nor did she look ill. She didn't look as if she belonged on the lower rungs of society. She was a pretty young woman in her mid-twenties, clearly well-bred, but tense from embarrassment and apprehension. A combination of shame, diffidence and cold seemed to have reduced her to a state of misery. She was an unexpected sight on that strange evening. I don't know why I did it but I stopped her from leaving and asked her, "Who are you?" I used the form

of language we normally use when speaking to respectable persons. "Are you unwell or have you lost your way? And where do you live? Shall I take you home?"

'She looked at me—for the first time—and said, "My home is in Chetla but I have been thrown out of the house."

'Thrown out of the house? And the wretched woman had walked all the way from Chetla to Bowbazar? And what was more, with a small child on such a cold, wintry day. Suddenly I was very annoyed with her as well as her family who had treated her so atrociously. I just said, "But why did you not stay close by? Why did you have to come all this way and stray so far from your home?" What I really intended to tell her was that she was old enough to realize the consequences for a young respectable woman out of her home so long and so late.

'She stood there quietly with tears in her eyes. She had evidently had no conception of the insecurity of being homeless. I softened a little and told her, "Come, let me take you home." She readily agreed, so I hailed a taxi and took her back to Chetla. It was around nine o'clock in the evening. After knocking at the door for a while a man, rather stout, came down and said, "Yes?" Then he spotted the woman and spoke to her roughly, "So where have you been? And who is this man?" meaning me. I told him what had happened. The man gave the woman a suggestive look and said, "Well, she left on her own, and you need not have taken the trouble to bring her back. If you can afford to ride in a taxi you must be well off. I suggest you take her back with you."

'I was fuming with rage. As I went back to the taxi I said, "Why should I take her back? Who is she to me? I can't hang around, you do whatever you wish with her."

'Then that awful man said with a crude sneer, "So she is nobody to you, yet you seem to know her well enough to escort her back here at dead of night. I am afraid she has no place in my home." And he went in and banged the door shut. I made some futile efforts to call him back but he didn't relent. Meanwhile a crowd was collecting, to my embarrassment, so I said to the woman, "Look, I am very sorry, but I must leave you here."

The woman tried to speak but was prevented by her tears. Finally she managed to say, "I know these people will not take me in now, but how can I stay out in the open on this cold night with this small child? Won't you please put me up for tonight only? I shall return tomorrow and plead with them to take me back."

'I was in a fix. What could I do? Although I was sick of the whole business by then, I eventually had to agree to take her back with me. This caused more problems. I was a bachelor, I had no relations and there was no woman living in my house. I had a man-servant who usually slept in my shop. I told him that a relation of mine had arrived unexpectedly from my village and she with her child had to put up in the house. And I promised myself to get rid of them first thing tomorrow.

'But it did not turn out that way. When I took her back to Chetla the following day, we were abused in the most foul language, both her and me.' Then his uncle was silent for a while. 'You see, after that there was nowhere the two of you could go. However much a woman might be tortured and insulted, however unhappy she might be, if she runs away and spends a night or even a day away from home, that is an unforgivable crime. Ever since then the two of you have been with me.'

Sudeb listened, hardly daring to breathe. A thousand questions and counter-questions tumbled through his mind. He sat there speechless, his face lowered.

His uncle continued, 'Perhaps the thought that is running through your mind is whether you had any other relations to whom you could have gone. No, you did not. Your mother was orphaned as a child and was brought up by a maternal uncle, who having married her off considered himself relieved of any further responsibility. Hence he was not prepared to take her back when she was widowed with a child. The Chetla relation was a cousin of your father and for some reason his wife had not taken kindly to your mother. I came to know all this much later.'

Sudeb got up. 'Then shall I go, Kaka?' His uncle sat there miserably, as if he was in the dock of an invisible and silent court of law which was trying to untangle a host of unspoken cross-examinations and evidences. Who was the judge? Was it Sudeb? And what was the accusation? Was it the charge of having shown compassion? Who was being tried? The fugitive and her shelterer?

He got up to open the door for Sudeb, who suddenly turned round and asked him, 'Tell me, why did you have to change my name from Chakravarty to Sarkar?'

Again discomfited, his uncle said, 'I wasn't going to, it was your mother's idea. At first, in order to be able to keep you both in my house I had let it be known that your mother was the widow of a brother and that you were my nephew. When the time came

to get you into a school we realized that retaining your original family name could put your mother in a very awkward situation, leading to comment and questions from all kinds of people.' He paused for a while, then said, 'Of course, I didn't realize until some years later that what we did then to avoid embarrassment might snowball into a potentially much more difficult situation, as has happened today.'

For a modern and educated young person like Sudeb this revelation about his past, though unnerving, might not have been taken so seriously and could be shrugged off as an issue of little importance. In any case, there was no bar to Sudeb's marrying someone outside his caste if he so wished. It was also possible for him to admit to his friends that he did not really belong to the Sarkar family and that his original family name was Chakravarty. And it was always possible that he might not marry at all.

But these were not Sudeb's thoughts. Something else was bothering him, at the back of his mind... Why did his uncle never marry? How did he gain by keeping Sudeb's mother with him for so many years? And his mother? Why did she choose to stay on? Was there really no option of moving out?

Then there were times when he would stop to reflect and try to reason. Why, indeed, should he be so disturbed about what had happened? Did he have any right to be? Had not his mother and uncle taken good care of him? What right had he to find fault with them? Where could his mother have gone? Where indeed — the outcome might have been far worse.

Tales from old epics and ancient literature crowded his thoughts. Many episodes — of Vyasa and his mother Satyabati, of Karna and his mother Kunti, of Brihaspati and his wife Tara; of Jabala, of Ahalya — all revered women who had strayed from the path of virtue. His restless mind attempted to analyse these stories, uncharitably, unhappily.

He remained busy with his work during the day and when he returned home in the evening he keenly watched his mother and uncle and listened to what they said to one another. A growing resentment clouded his perception. Shortly thereafter he informed his uncle that he had received an attractive job offer from a government hospital and that the job was outside Calcutta.

His uncle was taken aback, and asked, 'But what about your mother?'

'Surely she can stay here,' was Sudeb's calm reply.

His uncle said nothing, but he inferred correctly that Sudeb wanted to escape from this home.

Sudeb, indeed, had an interesting job. There was much to do and Sudeb applied himself heart and soul to this new assignment. His superiors were impressed by his dedication and his sense of duty; he was certainly the ideal doctor in their eyes.

During his free time Sudeb assiduously studied history, books on religion, ancient literature. All the time he was questing for a source of comfort for his tortured mind, but paradigms and parallels proved illusory. Memories of childhood returned like fading sketches to which he put colours according to his mood of the moment.

Perhaps Vyasa forgave his mother, Satyabati, Sudeb considered, but Karna certainly did not forgive his mother, Kunti. In fact, Karna had never acknowledged Kunti as his mother and had been full of bitterness towards her. But Karna himself could not come to grips with his life and eventually chose death. And Kunti? Although her other sons won back their kingdom Kunti never did share it with them. Instead she retired to the forest and died in a forest fire. Perhaps it was the fire that was already searing her soul, or was it the scorching blaze of Karna's condemnation?

News came that his uncle was ill. Sudeb went home. He got a chance to see him, but he died a few days later with Sudeb by his bedside. He left everything by his will to Sudeb—his house, his business, his money. Sudeb was not particularly moved by his uncle's death, yet a sense of guilt did prick his conscience. A feeling of indebtedness to his uncle for his own life and existence now grew into a formidable load that he would have to carry all his life.

Faithfully, religiously, Sudeb observed all the rituals and performed the prescribed last rites for his uncle. When this was all over he told his mother that it was time for him to return to his work. His mother had no inkling at all of the talk that Sudeb had had with his uncle about their past. Nevertheless, she did notice that Sudeb had changed in his manner and attitudes.

'And where will I live?' she asked her son.

'You can continue to live here, but should you wish to retire to Kashi arrangements can be made.'

His mother kept quiet for a little while, then said, 'Have you considered marriage at all?'

Sudeb's face hardened, he almost wanted to shout unpleasantly, 'Marriage? Have you kept the door open for me?' but he refrained. All he said was, 'Not now, later perhaps.' His stern face and his brief and curt replies gave his mother the message that any decision on this subject was now outside her jurisdiction.

His mother finally opted for Kashi. Money she had as well as unlimited free time on her hands, an overload of mental fatigue and above all an exiled life—ignored and neglected. Remittances came regularly, letters rarely, Sudeb never. He could never find time from his busy work schedules.

After a year or so Sudeb suddenly resigned his job and returned to Calcutta. Equally suddenly he also got married—no religious ceremony, no wedding guests. It was all done at a marriage registrar's office.

His friends complained, 'Why did you do this? Why didn't you ask your mother to be with you for the occasion? And you also denied us some fun and feasting. At any rate why did you decide on this form of marriage—after all your wife belongs to the same caste as you?'

To all this Sudeb's laconic reply was, 'No, no, this is much better. A Hindu marriage is a very involved affair and carries too many liabilities. This way we can be free of each other if the need ever arises. As for my mother, I propose to go and see her soon sometime. I deliberately didn't ask her here because I knew she would not have approved of this form of marriage. She belongs to the earlier generation and believes in old traditions.'

From time to time Sudeb's wife insisted, 'Let us go and see Ma, or better still let us ask her here.' Sudeb always found some excuse or other. 'Much too much work to do now. Yes, yes, we will certainly go and see her, give her a surprise.'

Perceptible changes now occurred in Sudeb's lifestyle. A happy home, now with a little boy added to the family, plus a measure of affluence gave his life new directions. Rewarding work, a loving family, congenial friends—life was fairly full for him.

On the occasion of their son's weaning ceremony his wife suggested a visit to the mother who was yet to see her grandson. Sudeb, who had the boy in his arms, was momentarily distracted. For an instance he recalled the story that his uncle had told him of another small boy, thinly clad, held in the arms of a young widow seeking shelter.

'Yes, we shall certainly go,' he told his wife, 'but let the child grow a little older.'

The child was growing up and Sudeb's excuses were also multiplying. It was very cold now, the boy might catch a chill — this was the season of epidemics, they shouldn't take any risks — Kashi was very hot now, certainly not a suitable time for visiting, and so on. Meanwhile, time relentlessly marched on.

A letter arrived from Kashi telling them that his mother was unwell. She wished to see her grandson, could the child be taken to Kashi? Sudeb's wife was very upset and told her husband, 'It's really a shame. Now we must go.' So arrangements were set in hand for the journey. They began packing all the things they would need, particularly for the child — his clothes, tinned milk and other foods, and all the other things that a family needed, but the day of the departure kept getting put off on one pretext or the other; either the child was not too well or Sudeb had a difficult patient or whatever.

There was no further word from Kashi and it was presumed that his mother had recovered. Yes, of course they would go and see Ma, but when Sudeb was a little freer from his commitments.

Then another letter arrived from Kashi with the news that Sudeb's mother had died.

Sudeb's wife was now very distressed. She admonished her husband, 'How could you ever do this? How horrible!' Sudeb, now feeling very unhappy, asked his wife, 'When should we leave?'

'Since I could never meet your mother when she was alive, what is the point in my going there now? No, I shan't go, you had better go on your own,' his wife replied, deeply anguished.

Sudeb went alone to Kashi and once there he observed all the required rituals. The final rites were to be performed on the bank of the Ganga; a large marquee had been set up for the purpose. Sudeb's reputation as a well-known doctor had preceded him to Kashi, therefore all arrangements had been made in keeping with his standing. A feast for Brahmins was to follow the religious ceremony.

On the day of the *shraddha* Sudeb took a dip in the Ganga. The rituals commenced with the priest chanting the incantations, then asking Sudeb to recite his own name and those of his father and grandfather.

'My name is Sudeb Chakravarty, my father was the late Sasankamohan Chakravarty and my grandfather the late Suryamohan Chakravarty,' said Sudeb with no hesitation at all.

The priest looked at him, perplexed, and asked him haltingly, 'But are you not Dr Sudeb Sarkar.'

Sudeb retorted sharply, 'Not Sarkar, Chakravarty.'

The priest's gaze took in the decorated marquee, the many gifts — silverware, brassware, clothes and garments, a bedstead and bedding, a variety of edibles and much else. He also did not miss the diamond solitaire on Sudeb's finger and the leather case lying next to him, presumably containing money. Well, the priest conceded, Sudeb must know what he was doing.

Sudeb returned to Calcutta some days later. It was an early winter evening, a cold day, the sky was overcast and the air hazy with mist — like that other evening many years ago that his uncle had described for him. His wife was waiting for him, the child with her, getting tea ready for her husband. The boy eagerly jumped into his father's arms. He was a pretty child; most people thought he took after his father.

'Did Ma leave any message for us?' his wife asked.

Sudeb just shook his head. He could hardly speak; his voice had choked with emotion. He held his son close to him and felt his tiny heartbeats pulsing against his own body — as perhaps did the heartbeats of another son many years ago, lying in the arms of a helpless, homeless young mother on a similar gloomy evening.

Translated by Sukhendu Ray from the original '*Karma Kunti Katha*' published in *Golpobharati*, Ashwin 1358 BS (Sept-Oct 1951).