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Atheists, Gurus and Fanatics: Rabindranath Tagore's 'Chaturanga' (1916)

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Dr Kaiser Haq gives his fine new English translation of Tagore's novella *Chaturanga* the title 'Quartet'.¹ This elegantly preserves much of the meaning of the Bengali title, for not only does it imply the 'four limbs' or 'four parts' that make up the novella—the four chapters that were originally published separately in consecutive issues of *Sabujpatra* (November–February, 1915–16)—but also, as in a string quartet, the interplay between the four characters that the chapters are named after. Since Tagore was always alert to the full meaning or etymology of names, perhaps we should also remember that a *chaturanga* in epic India was a complete army comprising elephants, chariots, cavalry and infantry. This matches the grandeur of the novella, the vigour and precision of its prose, and the moral and spiritual battles that are its subject. Finally, *chaturanga* as a name for a chess game (technically a four-player version of the game) evokes both the intellectualism of the book and its concentrated passion.

Like a chess game played by grandmasters, *Chaturanga* is not initially easy to follow, but with careful reading and rereading its deliberateness, the thought that has gone into every move, emerges clearly. Its difficulty lies partly in its language. A few months before the appearance of *Chaturanga*, Tagore had used, in his short story *Strīr patra* (also published in *Sabujpatra*), the *calit bhāṣā*—the form of Bengali based on Calcutta speech that has become the standard form today. The later evolution of his fiction (and of Bengali fiction generally) was to lie in the direction of this simpler form of prose. In *Chaturanga* he uses the older *sādhu bhāṣā*, with its lengthier verb-endings and pronouns, but stylistically the novella is not a reversion to nineteenth-century expansiveness. It is extremely compact and controlled, and rhythmically so taut that one often feels one is reading poetry. Tagore's biographer, Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay, rightly

¹ (Heinemann International, Asian Writers Series, Oxford, 1993). I am grateful to Dr Haq and his publisher for allowing me to quote extensively from his translation.

says that taken together the four chapters are like a 'lyric', and it would therefore 'not be wrong to call it a *kābya-upanyās* ("poem-novel").² Some passages are poetically mysterious, hauling the reader down below the surface of realistic fiction into weird, intangible regions. Sachish, the young man who is firstly a fanatical follower of his atheist uncle Jagmohan and then, after his uncle's death, an equally fanatical devotee of the mystic Swami Lilananda, finds that both ideologies start to unravel when he spends a night in a cave—a cave (like Forster's Marabar Caves in *A Passage to India*) more ancient than any of the world's religious cultures:

After walking six hours in the sun that day we reached a promontory jutting into the sea. It was absolutely quiet and deserted; the susurrus of leaves in a coconut grove mingled with the lazy rumble of a nearly still sea.

It seemed to me as if a slumbering earth had stretched a weary arm over the sea. In the hand at the end of that arm stood a blue-green hill. There were ancient rock carvings in a cave in the side of that hill. Whether these were Hindu or Buddhist, whether the figures were of Buddha or Krishna, whether their craftsmanship betrayed Greek influence, these were contentious issues among scholars.

His experience in the cave is given as 'an extract from his diary':

'The cave had many chambers. I spread my blanket in one and lay down.

'The darkness of the cave was like a black beast—its moist breath seemed to touch my skin. It seemed to me like the first animal to appear in the very first cycle of creation; it had no eyes, no ears, it had only a huge appetite. It had been trapped for eternity in that cave. It didn't have a mind; it knew nothing but felt pain—it sobbed noiselessly.'

He is unable to sleep at first, but eventually

'After I don't know how long, a thin sheet of numbness spread over my consciousness. At some point in that semi-conscious state I felt the touch of a deep breath close to my feet. That primordial beast!

'Then something clasped my feet. At first I thought it was a wild animal. But a wild animal is hairy, this creature wasn't. My entire body shrank at the touch. It seemed to be an unknown snake-like creature. I knew nothing of its anatomy—what its head looked like, or its trunk, or its tail—nor could I imagine how it devoured its victims. It was repulsive because of its very softness, its ravenous mass.'

In fact the beast turns out to have 'a mass of hair' after all, and is actually Damini, the *femme fatale* of the novella, whose role I shall discuss later. But *Chaturanga* is not difficult because of its language, or because it plunges into obscure levels of consciousness; it is also

² *Rabīndrajībānī* (Visva-Bharati, Calcutta, 3rd. edn, 1961), vol. 2, p. 414.

dense with philosophic argument. Disturbed by the threat to his devotional equilibrium posed by the charms of Damini, Sachish announces to his friend Sribilash (whom he sometimes jokingly calls 'Bisri'—an inversion of the first two syllables, meaning 'ugly'):

'We can't keep Damini among us.'

'Why?' I asked.

'We must sever all connections with Nature.'

'If that is so,' I retorted, 'we must admit there's a grave flaw in our spiritual devotions.'

Sachish gave me an open-eyed stare.

'What you call Nature is a reality,' I said. 'You may shun it, but you can't leave it out of the human world. If you practise your austerities pretending it isn't there you will only delude yourself; and when the deceit is exposed there will be no escape-route.'

'I'm not interested in logical quibbles,' Sachish replied. 'I am being practical. Clearly women are agents of Nature, whose dictates they carry out by adopting varied disguises to beguile the mind. They cannot fulfil their mistress's command till they have completely enslaved the consciousness. So to keep the consciousness clear we have to keep clear of these bawds of Nature.'

I was about to continue but Sachish stopped me: 'My dear Bisri, you can't see Nature's fatal charm because you have already succumbed to it. But the beautiful form with which it has bewitched you will disappear like a mask as soon as she has realized her purpose; when the time comes she will remove the very desire which has clouded your vision and made you see her as greater than anything else in the universe. When the trap of illusion is so clearly laid, why walk with bravado straight into it?'

'I accept all you are saying,' I replied, 'but I'd like to point out that I didn't myself lay this world-wide trap of Nature, and I know no way of evading it. Since we can't deny it, true devotion in my view ought to allow us to accept it and yet enable us to transcend it. Whatever you say, dear Sachish, we are not doing that, and so we are desperately trying to amputate one half of the truth.'

'Could you spell out a little more clearly what sort of spiritual path you wish to follow?' he asked.

'We must row the boat of life in Nature's current,' I said. 'Our problem should not be to stop the current; our problem is to keep the boat from sinking and in motion. For that we need a rudder.'

'Our guru is that rudder,' Sachish retorted, 'but you can't see that because you don't accept him. Do you wish your spiritual development to follow your own whims? The result will be disaster.'

So saying, Sachish retired to the guru's room, sat down at his feet and began massaging them.

Even allowing for a *penchant* for metaphysical debate notorious in nineteenth and early twentieth-century Calcutta, this is clearly not a novel of social realism. It is rather, as Kaiser Haq recognizes in

his Translator's Introduction, a remarkably early example of literary modernism. Even today it seems *avant-garde*: in its structural and stylistic self-consciousness, its abrupt temporal displacements, its refusal purely to entertain, and, above, all in its use of fiction as a vehicle more for ideas than for social *mimesis*.

The ideas in the book, however, stem from a social context. They were not unique to Tagore, but had been in the air in Bengal for three or four decades (and some of them, of course, much longer than that). The first chapter, *Jyāthāmaṣāy* ('Uncle') is the most socially focused of the four. It takes us into the world of college students in Calcutta, with the charismatic Sachish arousing the passionate admiration of his fellow-student Sribilash, but the envy and hatred of the other students. Their English teacher, Wilkins, finds his job 'tantamount to menial labour', and only Sachish is spared his general contempt for the students:

'Sachish,' he would say, 'I'd like to compensate you for having to sit in this class. Come to my house—there you'll get back your taste for literature.'

This naturally makes the other students even more envious:

The incensed students claimed that the sahib was fond of Sachish because he was light-complexioned and had beguiled him by showing off his atheism. The more cunning students rallied together and went to the sahib to ask to borrow a book on positivism; he dismissed them, saying, 'You won't understand it'. The imputation that they were unfit even to be atheists merely increased their rage against atheism and against Sachish.

Sachish has acquired his atheism not from Wilkins but from his uncle Jagmohan. The story of Jagmohan—his quarrel with his orthodox brother Harimohan (Sachish's father) over property, his virtual adoption of Sachish (much to the fury of Harimohan), the seduction of the orphan Nonibala by Harimohan's spoilt son Purandar, Sachish's willingness (encouraged by his uncle) to marry Nonibala, Nonibala's tragic suicide just before the wedding—all this makes, in human and realistic terms, a short story in itself. Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay comments: 'If Rabindranath had not written the other three sections, it [the first section] would not have been thought incomplete as a short a story.'³ In terms of the ideas that Tagore is exploring, however, Jagmohan and his influence on Sachish are but the beginning. His death from plague totally sweeps the ground from under Sachish's feet:

³ *Ibid.*, p. 413.

It's impossible for us to imagine how much Sachish loved Uncle. Uncle was Sachish's father, friend, and even—in a sense—his son. For he was so absent-minded about himself and so ignorant of worldly affairs, that one of Sachish's prime responsibilities was to keep him out of trouble. Thus it was through Uncle that Sachish acquired what was his own and gave away what he had to contribute of his own.

It is also futile to try to imagine how Sachish was affected by the void left by Uncle's death. Sachish struggled in intolerable anguish to establish that the void could never in fact be so empty, that no emptiness was so absolute that it left no room for truth. For, if it wasn't the case that what was 'No' in one sense was also 'Yes' in another, then through the tiny hole of that 'No' the entire universe would vanish into nothingness.

He disappears for two years—

Then we heard that Sachish was somewhere in Chittagong. *Our* Sachish was with Swami Lilananda, dancing ecstatically, singing *kirtans*, playing cymbals, and rousing whole neighbourhoods into a state of excitement.

Once I couldn't imagine how someone like Sachish could be an atheist; now I couldn't understand how Swami Lilananda made Sachish dance to his tune.

The book's narrator, Sribilash, less 'deep' than Sachish, finds this swing from one extreme to another inexplicable, or explicable only in terms of a weakness in Sachish's character. Kaiser Haq, too, in his Introduction, explains it by referring to Sudhir Kakar's speculations on 'an underdeveloped ego' as the source of the Indian tendency to withdraw into mysticism.⁴ But Tagore's intention, I believe, is to bring out the limitations of Jagmohan's outlook rather than inadequacies in Sachish.

Jagmohan is really the most attractive and most morally admirable character in the book. His atheism is tinged not only with moral outrage at the hypocrisy and social cruelty of orthodox Hinduism (typified by his own brother, Harimohan), but with a keen sense of the ridiculous:

Jagmohan behaved with Sachish as if he was of the same age. He considered reverence for age an empty convention that confined the human mind in its servitude. A young man who had married into the family wrote to him, addressing the letter in traditional style, 'To Your Auspicious Feet.' He replied with the following advice:

My dear Naren:

What it means to describe the feet as 'auspicious', I do not know; nor do you; it is therefore sheer nonsense. Then again, you have completely ignored me and addressed my feet instead. You ought to know that my

⁴ In *The Inner World* (OUP, New Delhi, 1978).

feet are a part of my body and cannot be seen as separate from me as long as they are not severed. Further, they are neither hand nor ear; to make an appeal to them is sheer madness. Finally, your choice of the plural number over the dual with reference to my feet may express reverence, given that a certain quadruped is an object of devotion to you, but it bespeaks an ignorance of my zoological identity that should, I feel, be removed.

In his succour to the raped and abandoned Nonibala, and his furious confrontation with his other nephew Purandar (Sachish's brother, Harimohan's elder son), he is brave and compassionate. His death is noble: it is because he takes Muslim victims of the plague into his house that he catches the disease himself (Harimohan, in contrast, flees far from Calcutta):

'The creed I have lived by all my life has given me its parting gift,' he said to Sachish. 'I have no regrets.'

Sachish, who had never made obeisance to Uncle when he was alive, bent down and for the first and last time reverently touched his feet.

When Harimohan next met Sachish he said, 'This is how atheists meet their end.'

'Exactly!' said Sachish with pride.

His only failing is that his positivist philosophy gives his *protégé* Sachish nothing to help him bear the shock of bereavement. Sachish is young and vulnerable; his uncle takes on a parental responsibility for him. When Sachish goes off the rails, it is the dead Jagmohan who is really to blame, not Sachish himself.

Jagmohan is described as *takhankār kāler nāmjādā nāstik*—'a celebrated atheist of those times'. Is he modelled on a real individual? It has been suggested to me⁵ that the college teacher and writer Krishnakamal Bhattacharya could have been in Tagore's mind when he wrote *Chaturanga*. Bipinbihari Gupta's delightful memoirs, *Purātan prasāṅga*, were published only a couple of years earlier (after serialization in Hemendraprasad Ghosh's journal *Āryābarta*), and in them there is an extended portrait of Krishnakamal. The author sits with him on a park bench, and listens to him expatiate on Comte, Mill, Isvarchandra Vidyasagar and other atheist heroes. He begins by asking him about his (Krishnakamal's) youthful controversy with Dwijendranath Tagore (the poet's elder brother), which had been brought to light by the publication in *Suprabhāt* of some old letters from Dwijendranath. So Krishnakamal must have been well known

⁵ By Prasanta Kumar Paul, currently writing a massive new biography of Tagore (seven volumes have appeared so far).

to the Tagore family. His robust and witty way of talking is certainly similar to Jagmohan's. He speaks, however, with a greater sense of self-criticism: recalling with shame his anger and rudeness when Vidyasagar returned a book he had presented to him (he even vented his feelings in a satirical poem), and generally regretting his ingratitude to people (especially Englishmen) who tried to do him favours. So perhaps those who were forthright positivists in the 1860s and 1870s had mellowed by the time Bipinbihari Gupta conversed with Krishnakamal in 1910, providing a context for Tagore's presentation of Jagmohan's positivism as admirable in many ways, but insufficient as a philosophy of life, and also somewhat out of date.

We do not have to look far for a model for the second major influence on Sachish's development—Swami Lilananda. Surely, even if Tagore did not intend him to be a direct portrait, he could not have imagined the Swami without recalling the illiterate mystic, Ramakrishna Paramahansa, who had so enthralled the Calcutta élite in the 1870s and 1880s. There are give-away details in our first encounter with him. Sribilash traces Sachish to a village where the Swami is staying. Sachish greets his old friend in a state of spiritual intoxication—*neśā*: such is the nature of the cult he is caught up in. After receiving a *namaskāra* from Sribilash (a carefully atheist *namaskāra* that Jagmohan favoured—'like an unstrung bow: dispensing with the *nama* it stood ramrod straight') the first thing the Swami says is: 'Get the hookah ready for me, Sachish.' Like Ramakrishna, Lilananda is no ascetic when it comes to food and tobacco. He then produces a metaphor and a pun that could come straight out of the *Śrī śrīrāmakṛṣṇa kathāmṛta*:

I discovered that the Swamiji knew I had won the Premchand-Raychand scholarship. 'Baba,' he said, 'the diver has to go down to the seabed to look for pearls, but it's fatal to get stuck there, so he comes gasping to the surface to save his life. If you want salvation you have to leave the floor of the ocean of knowledge and come to the shore. You have won the Premchand-Raychand scholarship, now look to the Premchand-Raychand renunciation!'?

(The pun is on *br̥tti*—'scholarship'—and *nibr̥tti*—'renunciation'.) The Swami then smokes his hookah while Sachish massages his legs—again, something that Ramakrishna notoriously required his young (male) disciples to do. For Sribilash, this spectacle is 'so distressing' that he has to leave the room. Later, when we read of how Damini's late husband Shibtosh had become a devotee of the Swami, leaving his house in Calcutta and the guardianship of his wife to him when

he died, there is a sentence which I would be prepared to bet is a cunningly veiled yet obvious reference to Ramakrishna: *seidin haite jībanmuktir pratyāśāy se kāñcan ebaṃ anyānya ramaṇīya padārther lobh parityāg karite basila* ('Henceforth, in anticipation of his salvation, he decided to forgo the desire for gold and other charming substances'). *kāminī kāñcan*—'women and gold'—was Ramakrishna's most famous catchphrase for the pleasures that his devotees were expected to renounce. In the sentence quoted we have *kāñcan* ('gold') and a subtle hint of *kāminī* in the highly feminine and erotic word *ramaṇīya* ('charming'). And Tagore throws in *jībanmukti*, one of Ramakrishna's favourite words for spiritual liberation achieved through renunciation and ecstatic devotion.

Because of the justified respect that the Ramakrishna Mission commands in Calcutta, it is still very difficult to say a word against Ramakrishna in polite Bengali society. But studies are coming out now that enable one to see him more objectively, and therefore understand how Tagore and others who did not succumb to his charms must have felt about him. Sumit Sarkar has encouraged people to look at the text of the *Kathāmṛta* in a new way;⁶ Sudhir Kakar has subjected Ramakrishna to neo-Freudian analysis;⁷ above all, Narasingha P. Sil has debunked the saint so thoroughly and gleefully that it is hard to see how he will recover, once Sil's book becomes widely known.⁸

In Tagore's late novella *Mālañca* (1934), the heroine Niraja keeps a portrait of Ramakrishna above her bed. It brings her no solace at the end of her life, when illness and her husband's cruel infidelity prevent her from enjoying the garden that was a child-substitute for her (a stillbirth had made her barren); but the portrait is, nevertheless, an unquestioned symbol of sainthood and higher consciousness. If Tagore by then accepted the beatification of Ramakrishna, this was a corollary of his willingness publicly to esteem Vivekananda. His acquaintance with Sister Nivedita, promoter-in-chief of the Ramakrishna–Vivekananda cult (and the first translator of Tagore's short stories for *The Modern Review*), might also have swayed him. But I am struck (apart from the portrait on the wall in *Mālañca*) by

⁶ 'The Kathamrita as a text: towards an understanding of Ramkrishna Parahamsa', Occasional Papers on History and Society No. XXII (Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, Teen Murti House, New Delhi).

⁷ *The Analyst and the Mystic* (Viking, New Delhi, 1991).

⁸ *Rāmakṛṣṇa Paramahansa: A Psychological Profile* (Brill's Indological Library, Leiden, 1991).

the absence of any significant reference to Ramakrishna in Tagore's copious writings, and in Sil's exhaustively annotated account we find no mention of any contact between the poet and the saint. He is not mentioned at all in the lecture *Pūrba o pāścim* ('East and West', 1908), where, after praising Rammohan Ray and Ranade as bridge-builders between East and West, Tagore writes: 'The great-souled Vivekananda, whose death we mourned recently, took a similar stand. He had the genius to accept, harmonize and recreate, and he dedicated himself to the exchange of ideals between India and the West.'⁹

It is surely likely that Tagore found Ramakrishna distasteful. When the saint asked Maharshi Debendranath Tagore to 'remove his shirt in order to examine his chest with a view to ascertaining the great aristocrat's spiritual potential',¹⁰ we can assume that Tagore must have felt as disgusted as his father did himself; and Keshabchandra Sen's interest in Ramakrishna must have seemed utterly suspect to the *Ādi* ('Original') Brahmos, led by Debendranath and adhered to by Rabindranath, after Keshab broke with them in the schism of 1866. (It was suspect to the *Sādhāran* 'Ordinary' Brahmos that Keshab broke with in the second schism in 1878.) Tagore would also not have been amused by the insolent way in which Ramakrishna teased Isvarchandra Vidyasagar during their famous meeting, and by his patronizing comments on him afterwards.¹¹

Relating Swami Lilananda to Ramakrishna helps us understand more clearly what Tagore is saying about the mindless devotionism that he represents. For Sachish (and even for Sribilash for a while, such is the hold that Sachish has over him), the Swami is a lure from which he has to disentangle himself. But I do not believe he is any way a lure for Tagore himself. Jagmohan may be—hence his sympathetic portrait of him; but as regards Tagore's own *sāadhanā*, his own search for wisdom, Lilananda is not a player in the game at all. If he were, then one of the four chapters of the novella would have been assigned to him.

The second, third and fourth chapters of *Chaturanga* do not belong as dominantly to the characters by which they are named—Sachish,

⁹ Translation from *Towards Universal Man* (Asia Publishing House, London, 1961), p. 134.

¹⁰ Narasingha P. Sil (see fn.8), p. 64.

¹¹ Swami Nikhilananda (tr.), *Ramakrishna: Prophet of New India*, abridged from *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* (Rider & Co., London, 1951), pp. 107–16, 178. The tone is sharper in the original Bengali.

Damini, Sribilas—as the first part belongs to ‘Uncle’ (Jagmohan). All three are bound up with each chapter and with each other. Indeed the completeness—the *pūrṇatā*—that Jagmohan’s atheism lacks and which Tagore is struggling to define, in my view embraces all three of them. (Indeed it embraces Jagmohan too.)

The narrator, Sribilas, might at first seem negligible as a protagonist in *Chaturanga*’s spiritual battles. He is Sachish’s admirer and follower, without ideas of his own. But his ability to recognize Sachish’s special qualities sets him apart from the other students, arouses their enmity, and requires moral courage to sustain:

In appearance Sachish gives the impression of a celestial being. His eyes glow; his long, slender fingers are like tongues of flame; the colour of his skin is more a luminescence than a colour. As soon as I set eyes on him I seemed to glimpse his inner self; and from that moment I loved him.

Amazingly, many of his class-mates harboured deep-seated resentment against him. The fact is, those who are like everyone else arouse no hatred unless there is a reason. But when a resplendent inner self pierces the grossness that envelops it, some, quite irrationally, extend it heartfelt adoration; others, just as irrationally, try heart and soul to insult it.

The students I boarded with realized that I secretly admired Sachish. This became such a thorn in their sides that they didn’t let a single day pass without reviling him in my hearing. I knew that if sand gets in the eye rubbing makes things worse; it was best not to respond to unpleasant words. But one day such calumny was poured on Sachish’s character that I couldn’t keep quiet any more.

When Sachish abandons atheism and becomes a devotee of Swami Lilananda, Sribilash continues to stand by him:

Members of our group turned violently against Sachish. Many claimed to have known all along that there was no real substance to Sachish; he was all empty theory.

I realized now how much I loved Sachish. He had aimed a fatal missile at our group, yet I couldn’t bring myself to feel any anger towards him.

For a while he too is drawn into the cult, just as Sachish earlier drew him into atheism; but he is essentially too level-headed to sustain his devotion to it, and when they return to Calcutta, to live in the house that Shibtoosh (Damini’s late husband) has willed to Lilananda, his ecstasy fades:

During my delirious wanderings from village to village I had been in one frame of mind. After coming to Calcutta I found it difficult to sustain my drunkenness. All these days I had been in the realm of ecstasy, where the Cosmic Female and the consciousness pervading Male made love endlessly;

the music of that cosmic romance filled the village pastures, the peepul-shade at the river-crossing, leisurely afternoons, and the evening pulsating with the chirp of crickets. It was like a dream in which I floated without hindrance in the open sky; coming to the tough city my head suffered a knock, I was jostled by crowds—the spell broke.

For Sachish the spell lasts quite a bit longer, but his friend's tolerant loyalty and willingness patiently to question the validity of the cult enable him ultimately to break with it. And Sribilash wins an even bigger prize: Damini marries him, not Sachish. His wooing of her has wit and modesty and in its defiance of social opinion is as courageous as his loyalty to Sachish:

'Don't stare at me like that,' I said to Damini. 'When you once before found that this particular divine creation wasn't attractive, I could bear it, but it would be very difficult to bear it now.'

'I'm now finding that same creation to be quite good-looking,' Damini said.

'You'll go down in history,' I said. 'Even the fame of the intrepid man who plants his flag at the North Pole will be nothing compared to yours. You have achieved something not merely difficult, but impossible.'

Never before did I have such an absolute realization of the extreme brevity of Phalgun. Only thirty days, and each of them not a minute longer than twenty-four hours. God has all eternity in his hands, and yet such appalling niggardliness! I couldn't see why.

'Since setting yourself on this mad course, have you thought of your family?' Damini asked.

'They wish me well,' I said. 'So now they will disown me completely.'

'And then?'

'You and I will build a new home from scratch. It will be our very own creation.'

The name 'Sribilash' implies a certain warmth and hedonism: relaxation, luxury, dalliance, attractiveness—all are in the word *bilās*. Moral courage and social conscience tempered by relaxed tolerance, so that they never become fanatical: this seems an adequate prescription for life in many ways. But it is clearly not enough—*pūrṇatā* must embrace more than that. It is not enough for Damini, even though she marries Sribilash. Her dying words at the end of the book imply a further stage: *sādh miṭṭila nā, janmāntare ābār yena tomāke pāi*. This is very hard to translate. Kaiser Haq settles for 'My longings are still with me. I go with the prayer that I may find you again in my next life.' Her marriage with Sribilash has not totally fulfilled her, not totally satisfied her inner *sādh* ('desire, aspiration'). She hopes that it may be fulfilled in some future life—but presumably

that can happen only if Sribilash himself moves forward, sustains the capacity for spiritual growth that he has already shown by wooing and marrying her.

Why doesn't Damini marry Sachish? This is the book's most puzzling question. The attraction is there: Damini as an embodiment of the life-force—passionate, wilful, volatile, restless (her name means 'Lightning')—unsettles and agitates Sachish. He wants her to keep away, but he wants her to be near too. (The attraction-repulsion that he feels for her is central to his experience in the cave.) She resolves the situation by acknowledging him as her 'guru', not as a potential lover or husband. The first step in this process comes when Sachish asks her to forgive him for the contradictory signals he has sent out:

'Damini,' Sachish said, 'it was wrong of me to ask you to leave. Please forgive me.'

'Why are you saying such things?' Damini asked with palms joined submissively.

'No, really, please forgive me. I'll never again entertain for a moment the utterly unjust thought that to preserve our spirituality we can decide to keep you or abandon you, as the whim takes us. But I have a request that you must keep.'

At once bowing and touching his feet Damini said, 'I am yours to command.'

'Come and join us,' Sachish said. 'Don't hold yourself aloof like this.'

'Yes, I will join you,' Damini said. 'I won't break any rules.' She bent down again, touched Sachish's feet in obeisance and repeated, 'I won't break any rules.'

The second comes at the end of the third part, after Damini's outburst of rage at the irrelevance of the Swami's cult of *rasa* (translated by Kaiser Haq as 'ecstasy') to tragedies such as the recent suicide of the wife of one of the Swami's disciples on discovering that her husband has been having an affair with her sister:

Sachish gazed at her face in silence. 'Please explain to me,' Damini said, 'what use to the world are the things that engross you so day in and day out? Who have you succeeded in saving?'

I came out of my room and stood on the veranda. Damini went on: 'Day and night you go on about ecstasy, you talk of nothing else. Today you have seen what ecstasy is, haven't you? It has no regard for morals or a code of conduct, for brother or wife or family pride. It has no mercy, no shame, no sense of propriety. What have you devised to save man from the hell of this cruel, shameless, fatal ecstasy?'

I couldn't restrain myself and blurted out, 'We have planned to drive Woman far from our sphere and then devote ourselves undisturbed to the pursuit of ecstasy.'

Without paying any heed to my words Damini said to Sachish, 'I have got nothing from your guru. He hasn't been able to calm my restless mind even for a moment. Fire cannot put out fire. The path along which your guru has been driving everyone isn't the path of non-attachment or heroism or peace. That woman who died today was killed on the path of ecstasy by the demoness of ecstasy who sucked the blood out of her heart. Haven't you seen how hideous the demoness looks? My Master, I beseech you not to sacrifice me to her. Save me! If anybody can save me it's you.'

All three of us fell silent for a while. It became so still all around that it seemed to me as if with the chirp of crickets a numbness was stealing over the pale sky.

'Tell me what I can do for you,' Sachish said.

'You be my guru,' Damini replied. 'I won't obey any other. Give me a mantra that is above all these things, something that will keep me safe. Don't even let my guardian deity come close to me.'

Standing in a daze Sachish said, 'It will be so.'

Damini made a prolonged *pranam* with her head touching Sachish's feet. She mumbled over and over, 'You are my guru, you are my guru, save me from all sin, save me, save me . . .'

Why can Sachish be a 'guru' to Damini in a way that the Swami can not? The difficulty of the question is compounded by the structurally experimental way in which Tagore rounds off his novella. At the end of Chapter 3 there is a short *pariśiṣṭa*—'postscript'—which leaps forward to Sachish's situation after the novella's end:

Once more the rumour went round, and the papers reported in abusive terms that Sachish's opinions had been revised yet again. He had once loudly denied religion and caste; then one day he had just as loudly proclaimed faith in gods and goddesses, yoga and asceticism, purificatory rituals and ancestor worship and taboos—the whole lot. And yet another day he threw overboard the whole freight of beliefs and subsided into peaceful silence—what he believed and what he denied became impossible to determine. One thing was apparent: he had taken up welfare activities as he had done once in the past, but the caustic combativeness was no longer in him.

The papers had many taunts and harsh words about another matter: my marriage with Damini. Not everyone will understand the mystery behind this marriage, nor is it necessary that they should.

Kaiser Haq comments in his Introduction that it is 'a relief' to be told here that Sachish 'returns to social work but without the abrasive propagandizing of the past'. But for me the postscript implies that Sachish's inner *sādhanā* has become inaccessible to others, an utterly inner and private matter that neither Damini nor Sribilash nor the reader can share.

This is shown to be so in the fourth chapter. Half way through it, Sachish has 'a moment of truth' that finally releases him from the

Swami's cult. He wakes Damini and Sribilash up in the night to tell them excitedly what he has discovered:

We got out of bed in a hurry and went out to find Sachish standing on the cement terrace in front of the house. 'I understand it all,' he shouted. 'There's no more doubt in my mind.'

Slowly Damini sat down on the terrace. Sachish followed her absent-mindedly and sat down. So did I.

'If,' Sachish said, 'I move in the same direction in which He is approaching me I'll only move away from Him, but if I move in the opposite direction we shall meet.'

I stared in silence at his burning eyes. What he had said was correct according to linear geometry, but what was it all about?

Sachish continued. 'He loves form, so He is continuously revealing Himself through form. We can't survive with form alone, so we must pursue the formless. He is free, so he delights in bondage; we are fettered, so our joy is in liberty. Our misery arises because we don't realize this truth.'

Damini and I remained as silent as the stars. 'Damini,' Sachish said, 'don't you understand? The singer progresses from the experience of joy to the musical expression of the *raga*, the audience in the opposite direction from the *raga* towards joy. One moves from freedom to bondage, the other from bondage to freedom; hence the concord between them. He sings, we listen. He plays by binding emotion to the *raga* and as we listen we unravel the emotion from the *raga*.'

I don't know whether Damini understood what Sachish was saying, but she did understand Sachish. She sat quietly, hands folded in her lap.

Although Sachish's language here is similar to Tagore's own in his spiritual discourses, I do not think we are being invited to take Sachish's *words* particularly seriously here. It is the *process* that he is involved in, his relentless, obsessive search for truth, that is important, and which Damini understands. She also understands that he needs to pursue his quest alone. In the previous section of the chapter the intense introspection of the quest, the inaccessibility—to anyone other than himself—of the truth he seeks, is stated explicitly:

Until now he had been in a state of perpetual excitement, singing and dancing, shedding tears of joy, attending on his guru; and in a way he was quite content. His mind was exerted to the utmost at every moment, squandering all his energy. Now that he had gathered himself in stillness, his mind could no longer be kept in check. No more did he wallow in mystic contemplation of ecstatic union with the divine. Such a desperate struggle to attain understanding raged within him that it was terrifying to look upon his face.

Unable to contain myself any longer I said to him one day, 'Look here Sachish, it seems to me you need a guru who can lend you the support to make your quest easier.'

'O shut up, Bisri, shut up,' Sachish replied with annoyance, 'why take the easy way out? The easy way is a fraud, the truth is hard to attain.'

I said a little nervously, 'It is in order to show the way to the truth that ...'

Sachish cut me short: 'My dear fellow, this isn't the truth of a geographical description. The god within me will tread my road and none other; the guru's road only leads to his own courtyard.'

Words from Sachish's lips have so often contradicted each other! I, Sribilash, was Uncle's follower no doubt, but if I had ever called him my guru he would have chased me with a stick. Sachish had got me, the self-same Sribilash, to massage a guru's legs, and now soon after he was giving this lecture to the very same me! Not daring to laugh, I adopted a sombre expression.

Sachish went on. 'Today I have clearly grasped the significance of the saying, "Better die for one's own faith than do such a terrible thing as accept another's." Everything else can be taken from others, but if one's faith isn't one's own it brings damnation instead of salvation. My god can't be doled out to me by someone; if I find him, well and good, otherwise it's better to die.'

I am contentious by nature, not one to let go easily. 'One who is a poet finds poetry in his soul,' I said, 'and one who isn't borrows it from others.'

'I am a poet,' said Sachish brazenly.

Well, that settled it. I came away.¹²

Is there a historical model for Sachish? Possibly Swami Vivekananda was in Tagore's mind when he conceived the character, remembering that the young Narendranath Datta went through a positivist phase as a student before he was swept off his feet by Ramakrishna.¹³ Sachish's intensity, the impression he gives of celibacy and spirituality achieved only through a violent suppression of strong passions, certainly remind us of Vivekananda. I doubt, however, if Tagore felt sufficiently positive about him to accept him as a model for Sachish. Despite the public respect he accorded him (mentioned above), one hears anecdotally that there was little love lost between them. Vivekananda's remark to Sister Nivedita about the Tagores—'Remember that that family has poured a flood of erotic venom over Bengal'—is well known,¹⁴ and although Tagore was present at the large meeting in Calcutta on 21 February 1897 welcoming the Swami back from his triumphant visit to America, France and England,¹⁵ the absence—as with Ramakrishna—of any extended reference to him in his writings is conspicuous. As his precursor as an Indian emissary to the West, preaching the harmony of Eastern and Western

¹² There will always be arguments about the translation of *dharma*. Kaiser Haq settles for 'faith' here; 'duty', 'role in life' are further aspects of its meaning.

¹³ Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Europe Reconsidered: Perceptions of the West in Nineteenth Century Bengal* (OUP, Delhi, 1988), pp. 229–30.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 225.

¹⁵ Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay (see fn 2), vol. I, p. 450.

traditions, and as the founder of an institution potentially more powerful than Visva-Bharati, Vivekananda must have been seen by Tagore as a rival. Temperamentally they had little in common; Tagore came to dislike intensely the neo-Hindu nationalism that Vivekananda and Nivedita inspired;¹⁶ and if Vivekananda found Tagore's writing decadent, Tagore must have found Vivekananda's racy, indisciplined Bengali prose tastelessly lacking in decorum. In any case, when Sachish says to Sribilash *āmi kabi* ('I am a poet'), that, as Sribilash says, settles it: *bās, cukiya gela, caliya āsilām* ('Well, that settled it. I came away'). Whatever ingredients from the experience of a generation (Vivekananda included) Tagore used for his portrayal of Sachish, he is essentially a projection of himself, his own inner quest, for *āmi kabi* was the one thing that Tagore knew for certain about himself. This identification alone makes it impossible to marry Sachish off to Damini. Tagore had himself been left alone, by the deaths of his wife in 1902, a daughter in 1903 and a son in 1907; and the deeply introspective poetry of the *Gītāñjali* phase immediately preceding *Chaturanga* had settled him into utterly lonely patterns of devotional thought.

The intense privacy of Tagore's own *sādhana* is further reason for excluding the exhibitionist, communal devotionalism of Swami Lilananda from any serious consideration. Of course the Swami—like Ramakrishna—might *say* things that Tagore could agree with; and just before the cave episode he sings, as dusk descends, a song that transcends the singer, as often happens in Tagore's plays. The song is obscure in meaning, but it seems to hint at the ultimate unknowability of the divine, the dark mystery in which it is shrouded:

*pathe yete tomār sāthe
milan hala diner śeše.
dekhite giye, sājer ālo
miliye gela ek nimeše.*

*dekhā tomāy hok bā nā hok
tāhār lāgi karba nā śok,
kṣaṇek tumi dārao, tomār
caraṇ dhāki elokeše.¹⁷*

¹⁶ See Edward Thompson, *Rabindranath Tagore: Poet and Dramatist* (Oxford, 1948), p. 282.

¹⁷ Roughly: 'Going along the path, I met with you at the end of the day. As we went towards it, the evening light suddenly disappeared. Whether I see you or not, I shan't grieve: stop for a moment, let me cover your feet with my loosened hair.'

The image in the last line sets the song in the Vaishnava tradition of the devotee as female beloved, and God as male lover—a tradition that Ramakrishna fused with his worship of the Mother, and which Tagore certainly extended in his poems and songs. But a real quality of active human love is missing from Lilananda's cult, and this, finally, is what rules it out. Nirad C. Chaudhuri in his analysis of Tagore—most recently in his book in Bengali *Ātmaghāṭī Rabīndranāth*¹⁸—has always refused to characterize Tagore as a mystic. When one appreciates that Ramakrishna was the public epitome of mysticism in late nineteenth-century Calcutta, one can see why: the irrationalism, the illiteracy, the vulgarity and obscenity of his language, the exhibitionism of his perpetual states of *samādhi*, the absence of any doubt or agnosticism, and above all the lack of any social conscience or concern for others, were all anathema to Tagore. Not all these features are present in his portrait of Swami Lilananda, who despite his contempt for books appears to be quite an educated man. But Damini is treated by him with virtually no human consideration: he tries to stop her reading, and makes her slave and cook for the cult-followers just as Ramakrishna's wife Sarada Devi was made to do. Whatever the failings of the other characters in the book, none of them, by contrast, is lacking in love: Jagmohan loves Sachish, Nonibala and the Muslim tanners; Sachish loves Jagmohan and (probably) Damini; Damini loves Sachish and Sribilash—and also her pet animals; Sribilash loves all the other three.

Whenever Tagore tried to express moral, spiritual and emotional *pūrṇatā* he used the language of love. Thus he begins one of his finest Santiniketan sermons, on *Sāmañjasya* ('Balance'):

*āmra ār kono caram kathā jāni bā nā jāni nijer bhitar theke ekti caram kathā bujhe niyechi seti hacche ei ye, ekmātra premer madhyei samasta dvandva ek saṅge mile thakte pāre. yuktite tāra kātākātā kare, karmete tāra mārāmāri kare, kichutei tāra milte cāy nā, premete samastai mitmāt haye yāy. tarkakṣetre karmakṣetre yārā ditiputra o aditiputrer mato parasparke ekebāre binās karbār janyei sarbadā udyata, premer madhye tāra āpan bhāi.*¹⁹

¹⁸ (Mitra and Ghosh, Calcutta, 1991). The question 'Was Rabindranath a mystic?' is considered in pt II, ch. 5.

¹⁹ Roughly: 'Whatever supreme things we know or do not know, there is one supreme thing I have understood from my own inner experience: only through love can all conflicts be resolved. Those who cut themselves to pieces in arguments, or who fight over actions, those who don't want to agree at all, can reach agreement only through love. Those who, whether in the fields of debate or activity, are always ready to destroy each other like gods and demons, become brothers to each other through love.' *Santiniketan, Rabīndra-racanābali*, vol. 13 (Visva-Bharati, Calcutta, 1961), p. 467.

No one character in *Chaturanga* achieves this ideal *in toto*, but taken together—Jagmohan’s compassion, Sachish’s quest for truth, Damini’s passion, and Sribilash’s loyalty—they express it. This is the unity of the book. We find in it, so to speak, noble elephants in Jagmohan, perpetually questing chariots in Sachish, headstrong cavalry in Damini, and reliable infantry in Sribilash. Together they form Tagore’s army ‘on the field of Truth’,²⁰ and the battle they fight on his behalf—or the chess-game that they play—is not ultimately with each other but against the world’s false gods, false gurus, and the fanatical followers of the world’s false gods and gurus. The battle cannot be won: both in the personal and the social spheres of life, *sādh miṭīla nā*. But that is not a reason ever to abandon the struggle.

Postscript

Quite some time has elapsed between the writing of this paper and its publication, and inevitably my ideas have changed somewhat. I would not now press the parallel with Ramakrishna so far. Some would see Bijoykrishna Goswami (1841–1899) as more of a source for Swami Lilananda. In the last phase of his life, after his rift with Keshabchandra Sen, Goswami was a fervent Vaishnava.

N. P. Sil’s book on Ramakrishna in the event caused much less of a rumpus than Jeffrey J. Kripals’ *Kālī’s Child: The Mystical and the Erotic in the Life and Teachings of Ramakrishna* (Chicago, 1995). But I personally find Kripal more respectful and appreciative of Ramakrishna than his critics have asserted.

²⁰ Juan Mascaró (tr.), *The Bhagavad Gita* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1962), p. 43.