

# 4

## PORTRAIT OF MY MOTHER

‘यह मन्दिर का दीप इसे नीरव जलने दो’

### **Down the memory line: My Mother**

My memory goes back to 1942, when I was about five. We lived in a small cottage built in the Rosera school campus itself. It was well fenced. The bamboo fence was richly covered with green leaves exquisitely inlaid with flowers and fruits. In the north-east corner of the courtyard stood a massive Seesam tree turning the corner into an enthralling secret bower of boughs some of which were caught in the tight embrace of luxuriant bougainvilleas. The tree had not been pruned for years. On some of its drooping branches, tiny birds had built their nests. Underneath the tree, I had my world to my heart's delight. None else had time ever to enter the bower which had quite a few honeycombs with venomous bees frequently on wings. Most often I was myself a busy bee building pyramids and castles under the shade of the tree. I had underneath it my own Swiss bank for concealing my coins in certain holes I had dug up there.

Once I found my mother conversing with my father under the tree. Their voice was not audible. I wondered at their trespass on my domain where I loved playing the monarch, or the fool, or both in varying proportions in turns. Their conversation must have got as its subject something extraordinary. But it became clear to me soon after their meeting ended. We boarded a bullock-cart on way to our village, Kurson, at a distance of about 80 kilometers. Later I could know that the journey by road was to evade the vigilant eyes of the authorities of the British Raj, who kept a close watch on the activities of the nationalists considered dangerous to the Angreji Raj (the British Government). For me the journey on the bullock-cart was a wonderful experience. The journey through villages, groves, and paddy and sugarcane fields was extremely delighting. The cart moved on the cart-track in its slow and languid rhythm. We munched, when we felt hungry, the mixture of Chura-gur (flattened rice with jaggery), and the green grams that we plucked from the fields by the side of the mud-road. The clouds kept us under their canopy till we reached our village. As I felt strong thrill in driving the bullock-cart, I remained overbusy all through the way. Of the two bullocks, Shelebi was sharp and stallion-like, and needed just a touch on its back to respond well and to move fast, whereas Kaila was fat, but dull-witted, whom even strong goading failed in providing a spur to move forward at the speed matching that

of its other partner. My dog accompanied us, almost the way the dog had accompanied Yudhisthira to heaven. It loved concealing its movement by confining itself within the shade of the chassis of the moving cart. Whenever we passed through villages, young boys and girls formed a beeline behind the moving cart enjoying dust-bath till they felt tired and returned yielding place to other batches of children who found a lot of fun running that way. For the first time I experienced the pleasant smell of the clods of soil recently upturned in the field.

It took me several years to know what had been discussed in the conclave under the Shesham tree. My eureka. I have already written in the earlier Chapter how by 1942 the Struggle for Freedom had reached its crescendo. Father, a true Gandhian, thought of making his own contribution to the nation's struggle for freedom. He had his natural apprehensions of brutal retaliations. He needed my mother's consent to dedicate himself to that national cause. He needed her counselling, also as our tradition contemplates that the best counselling comes always from one's wife. If Ravana could have heeded to his wife, Mandodari, he would have escaped his tragic end. If Bali would not have spurned the advice given to him by his wife, Tara, he wouldn't have courted his ruin. My mother, like most ladies, took, in crucial moments, decisions only in her intuitive flashes. The voice of the soul never fails. Lord Krishna said in the *Bhagavad-Gita* (Ch. III.42) :

*indriyaniparanyahur  
indriyebhyah parama manah  
manasas tu para buddhir  
yo buddheh paratas tu sah*

[The senses are greater than the flesh; greater than the senses is the mind; greater than the mind is the intellect; and greater than the intellect is the Soul.]

My mother endorsed my Father's ideas without a moment's hesitation. In moments of taking decisions she never bothered to calculate their outcome. It seemed to me that she lived in moments, the moments which could measure eternity. She told him the story of Vidula which the *Mahabharata* narrates. Vidula advised her son Sanjay: '*Muhurtam jvalitan sreyah, na tu dhumayitam cirama*' (Better to blaze for a moment than to smoke continuously for long). She asked him to embark on his duty unconcerned with the distractions of life, and the calculations at the consequences. The way they discussed illustrated how their chemistry worked. I never saw them at loggerheads with each other: they could sort out their problems with ease and decency. The *Mahabharata* tells us that a man's best advisor is always his wife. When Maharaja Janaka decided to become a *Sannyasi*, giving up his duty as the King, and also as the householder, it was his wife who successfully persuaded him not to withdraw himself into *Sannyasa* abandoning his duties to work for the weal of people. It is said that Gautam Buddha, after his *sannyasa* and attainment of *Buddhatva*, chanced to meet Yasodhara, his wife. She asked him: "What did you get after leaving the family and taking *sannyasa* that you could not have got in the family itself?" The Buddha kept silence as he couldn't answer her. In 1942 my mother was of 35 years, and I was barely 5. Her parents were in deep troubles on account of a fratricidal conflict going on

amongst the members of closely related families. My maternal grandfather and my eldest maternal uncle had been killed. She must have known how the freedom fighters were treated by the British power: if fortunate then only R.I. in prison, if not then transportation for life, or even death sentence. She did not allow her imaginings to weaken her by painting desperate straits which could await her and her child. When I write these words, I see my words on my computer through the film of tears in my eyes. If there is anything in my life which makes me feel proud, it is to get them as my parents from whom I learnt something about the art of life otherwise I too would have been just, to say in the words of Will Durant, one of “the insects on the earth”<sup>1</sup>

### **Her birth; Her name**

She knew that she had come to visit this planet for about 66 years, and would die of some blood-related disease. Balkrishna Thakur of her parents' village had predicted it about three decades before her death, in December 1973. Thakur was a great astrologer and Sanskrit scholar from whom I learnt something of that language. My mother believed in his prediction. When she was diagnosed developing glaucoma I grew worried but she remained unruffled. I grew worried thinking of one who could see through atoms would not be able to see even the stars! She said that none need get worried because she was not born to go beyond her sixties. The predictions came true: she died in her sixties, and of blood-related disease, cardiac arrest on account of convulsion in her blood vessels.

I believe she was born in 1907 in village Shernia, then under the Munghyr district of the North Bihar. Her father, the celebrated Pichitlal Mishra, named her 'Draupadi'. In our society, it is conventional to name daughters after the goddesses like Gauri, Tara, Sita or Radha. But to call his daughter 'Draupadi' must have been his conscious choice. He was himself a firebrand, and he seems to have wished his daughter to be fiery. None else in our classics had a personality with so much of fire and light as 'Draupadi' of the great *Mahabharata*. He could not have named her after 'Draupadi' without seeing in his vision what she was to become in her life. Osho, reflecting over 'Draupadi', wrote:

“The fact remains that in the history of world there is none comparable to Draupadi. It sounds strange. One remembers Sita, one remembers Savitri. There are many others in our memory. Yet I say Draupadi is incomparable. Draupadi is extraordinary; she possessed the sweetness and grace of Sita, and salt of Cleopatra. She did have beauty of Cleopatra but she was endowed with logic of Gargi. In fact the whole of the *Mahabharata* moves round her as the axis. The whole war was fought with she at the central point..... This Draupadi is really a paragon. After the war Bhishma was lying on the bed of arrows. Krishna asked the Pandavs to seek the secrets of *Dharma* from the great man on the bed of arrows. And then Draupadi laughed. Her laughter resonates over whole of the *Mahabharata*. She laughed at the instruction to know the secret of *Dharma* from Bhishma, who sat drooping his head low when she was being unrobed in the Court of Duryodhana by Dushyashan. She is an extraordinary lady.”<sup>2</sup>

My maternal grandfather must have discovered something extraordinary in his eldest daughter. And her life proved her name most appropriate.

On the basis of what I saw, and heard, she did resemble the 'Draupadi' portrayed in the great epic, the *Mahabharata*. When a short while before her death, I asked her: "How could you spend those days of anguish and deprivation in a remote village when my father was undergoing sentence under the worst risks, and no silver lining could be seen in the densely cloud-cast sky of your life?" In her muted voice, and with subdued smile, she quoted the Draupadi of the *Mahabharata*. When she had lost all hope to save herself from discomfiture in the court of Duryodhana in the ample presence of her husbands and the eminent elders, Draupadi prayed in her silence to Lord Krishna for succour. The great Vyasa expressed her silent prayer thus:

*Naiva me patayas santi, na putra, na ca bandhvah  
Nabhrataro, na ca pita, naiva tvam madhusudana.*<sup>3</sup>

When the Lord helps, no distress can sweep one off one's ground, or can crush one to dust.

Without Draupadi, the *Mahabharta* could not have been conceived. It was her laughter, on seeing how Duryodhana mistook marble for water when he had visited her husbands' place, that had sown the seed of wrath in the mind of that mighty man. She inspired her husbands' by invigorating them and inspiring them to embark on their duty which the circumstances demanded for the promotion of *Dharma*. She could corner even Lord Krishna in order to make Him function as the instrument of unfaltering justice. Yet she played her role as a wife with excellence. She had explained *Stridharma* (the duties of a wife towards her husband and others) to Satybhama, one of Lord Krishna's wives. This great event is narrated in the 'Draupadi-Satybhama Parva' of the *Mahabharata*. I always felt my mother's life proved her name right. She could suffer yet act with joy. Her silence spoke, her speech silenced.

#### **Art of suffering with tongue-tied patience**

She bore for quite some time her claustrophobic sufferings when our nation was fighting for her freedom. In our village we had no trustworthy channel to know things happening outside. No newspaper reached our village. Once in a while, someone returning from Patna or Darbhanga brought some information, distorted by every tongue and ear that carried it forward. None in the village had a radio. My cousin's HMV Gramophone was a magic-box for the village folks to wonder at. The postman in his fortnightly visits brought some words which passed for news. Words of mouth went round in our small world. Hearsay held the sway. Rumours, rather than information, multiplied, and circulated the way Pope described the way rumours circulate:

The flying rumours gather'd as they roll'd  
Scarce any tale was sooner heard than told  
And all who told it added something new  
And all who heard it made enlargement too.

Rumours passed for truth. Rumours became more palatable and believable when they get embroidered with skill. Men used to assemble on the green grass of the Shri Rama Temple, or under the massive Banyan tree, to hear about the happenings in the British Raj. For months, my mother did not know whether her husband was alive, or dead. Perched on the Banyan's long fat roots, crooking into the water of the Rani Pokhar, I enjoyed angling, watching how the bite-indicator was dragged and released by the fishes. I watched how the hook worked inside water, and also heard what my elders talked amongst themselves. They often talked about the events pertaining to the Freedom Movement. They enjoyed embroidering on them, and adding their own gloss. When great leaders, like Nehru or Gandhi, were in prison, even minute details of the events about them were reported in the media. When it was some ordinary person, none bothered about him. That is the way how this world works. In our village we lived in total darkness. In that hallucinatory ethos, we heard the lurid tales how so many persons were hanged, so many were tortured, so many whisked off to some unknown destinations, so many killed..... Our village became the target of the British wrath because it had produced a band of freedom-fighters. I carried whatever I heard from them to my mother. She used to hear what I had to say, but she never reacted; She maintained her mental poise believing in what Krishna had said the *Bhagavad-Gita*: 'My devotees never perish' (*name bhaktah pranasyati*).

### **Her Education**

My mother had no formal education. What astonished me was her sharp intelligence, practical insight, capacity to take difficult decisions, and fortitude in facing consequences. My mother belonged to a traditional rural family which believed that the women's job was merely to run the household. In her days, girls were not permitted to go to schools. Elementary knowledge of three R's, acquired at home, was considered enough. Mother learnt these from her youngest brother Jageshwar Mishra whom she loved intensely. Whenever she could steal some time from the domestic chores, she would conceal herself in a bush behind the massive barn to learn from the books which her youngest brother had preserved for her.

Her remarkable creative plasticity expressed herself in the making of the clay images, and also in the exquisite and expressive patterns she drew with the white paste of rice on the floor and the walls on auspicious occasions. On the occasion of the *pooja* of goddess Durga, she used to draw images on the doors, the images which had profound aesthetic richness. The images of the palms, she painted, lingered in mind to become for me, in later times metaphors suggesting *karmayoga*. Years after, I read Bronowski's comment on the picture of hand in El Castillo, Stantander in Spain: "All over these caves the print of the hand says: 'This is my mark. That is man.'<sup>4</sup> And this also brought to mind what Bronowski aptly considered a tribute to human creativity: to quote—

"There are many gifts that are unique in man; but at the centre of them all, the root from which all knowledge grows, lies the ability to draw conclusions from what we see to what we do not see, to move our minds through space and time, and to recognise ourselves in the past on the steps to the present. All over these caves the print of the hand says: 'This is my mark. This is man.'"

She acquired knowledge, and wisdom from the lores of our classics. Those days almost everyone read, or heard, the *Ramayana* of Valmiki, the *Ramacharitmanasa* by Tulsidas, the *Mahabharata* and the *Bhagavad-Gita*, and the great *Srimad Bhagavad Mahapurana*. Afternoons of most persons were devoted to such pursuits. They learnt the art of life from these great books; they developed their strength how to pass through the twists and turns of their lives in the light of the wisdom they gathered from the classics. The great classics provided them with a source of wisdom and inspiration to face the challenges of life. What is said about the *Srimads Bhagavad Mahapurana*, in the following lines, applies to the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* also.

That destroys the lust for the pleasures of the senses,  
That develops detachment, wisdom and purity,  
That enlightens the realities of the cosmic order,  
That supreme light of the science of the Absolute

My mother developed her interest in the *Ramacharitmanas* by Tulsidas. It helped her solve the problems of life whenever she found them too difficult.

She was extremely fond of what is popularly known as the 'Rama Gita' which consists of a few *chaupais* in the Lankakand of the *Ramacharitmanas*. In these *chaupais* Sri Rama tells Vivishan what constitutes the real chariot which ensures victory, called the 'Dharmaratha'. This contains all the fundamental principles for guidance to achieve success. It teaches us how to get on the life's chariot of action, and also when and how to get down of it. Vibhishan was worried seeing Sri Rama in the battle-field bare feet, whereas His adversary, the mighty Ravana, was on a chariot. Sri Rama assuaged Vivishan by telling him that the chariot which leads one to victory is of another kind. Whether it is the life of individual, or of a nation, the qualities which Sri Rama mentions are of the greatest value. They deserve to be remembered whatever be the sphere of one's actions: science, art, or commerce. My mother loved these lines from the *Ramacharitmanas*. She made me recite those lines several times. With film of tears in my eyes, I recited these lines for the last time to her when she was lying dead near the holy bush of Tulsi. It would be good if we deeply reflect on what Sri Rama had told Vivishan ( I quote the lines as rendered into English by Dr R.C. Prasad):

“ ..... 'the chariot which leads one to victory is of another kind.

Valour and fortitude are the wheels of that chariot, while truthfulness and virtuous conduct are its enduring flags and pennants; strength, discretion, self-control and benevolence are its four horses, harnessed with the cords of forgiveness, compassion and evenness of mind.

The worship of God is its skilled charioteer, dispassion his shield and contentment his scimitar; charity is his axe and reason his fierce lance and the highest wisdom his relentless bow.

A pure and steady mind is his quiver, filled with the arrows of quietude, restraint and religious observances. Homage to the Brahmins and to one's own preceptor is his impenetrable buckler; there is no other way to ensure victory than this.

He, my friend, who rides upon such a chariot of righteousness, has no enemy to conquer anywhere.

Listen, my resolute friend; he who owns so powerful a chariot as this is a hero who can vanquish even that mighty and invincible foe, birth and death.”

### **My Diksha**

I couldn't have thought of anybody else to provide me with the *dikshamantra*. The great Sankaracharya had received the *sannyas diksha* from his mother. Manu had observed: “An Acharya or a Vedic teacher excels ten *upadhyayas* or teachers, a father excels a hundred *acharyas* but a mother excels a thousand fathers.” On the Vijyadasmī day of 1970, I received my *mantra* from my mother. This spiritual experience I got in terms of the Tantric tradition of Mithila. Under our received tradition, *tantra* and *yoga* lead to the same end. With passage of time I felt that the Mahavidhya Tara, my deity, whose mantra I recite, acquired a living presence in my life. Whenever I was in crisis, I sought Her help which She never denied, She never delayed. When I am alone. She is within me, with me, and for me. I pray She comes to my mind when I am near my death, and I can tell Her in my silence:

मत्समः पातकी नास्ति पापघ्नी त्वत्समा न हि  
एवं ज्ञात्वा महादेवी यथा योग्यं तथा कुरु

### **The craze for a son, & her distress**

My mother was the eldest daughter of a rich land-owner. She was married to a poor man's son. My mother adjusted herself with her circumstances without ever grumbling. But she had her worry of the most agonizing kind. Elders of the family eagerly awaited her to be blessed with a child. Years passed. At that time a barren womb was considered the worst crime. If no child was born within 2 to 3 years of marriage, it had become customary to pierce the young lady with frowning look and caustic comments. They believed that as a barren piece of land was worthless for husbandry so was a barren wife of no use to a family. Till her thirty-first year my mother had no issue. She faced, with remarkable resignation, the slings of her misfortune. Her in-laws were very considerate but there were limits beyond which their considerations could not go. They wanted my father to marry again, but he declined.

The members of her in-laws' family had their reasons. They believed that a son is needed most as a support in old age, as the protector and maintainer of the family tradition, and, the most important, as the saviour from the hell to which one might be destined to be dumped after death. When after my mother's death I heard the *Gadurpurana*, I was aghast at the ghastly imagination of those who composed it. It paints blood-curdling picture of hell. It tells us how a son alone could save his dead father or mother from the infernal agony by performing certain elaborate rituals in which it was customary to give cows, jewellery, elephants, and other valuables as gifts to the Brahmins. On hearing the most macabre description of the hell, no good son would allow his father or mother to

suffer hellfire. One did everything possible to raise resources to perform these rituals. Often one had to sell land and incur heavy debts. I too heard this *Garudpurana* twice, one after my Mother's death in 1973, and the other in 1982, when my father died. Most of my young readers may find it difficult to understand all this. That worldview has changed. But such wishes had bred an inveterate longing for a son in most Hindu families. The idea lingers in most minds even now. But all these are fast becoming the stories of the past. The present-day sons do not believe in hell or heaven: they are neither bothered about their parents' plight whilst they are alive, nor when they are dead and gone. It is quite understandable. Now most of them refuse to look after their aging parents needing help. My mother suffered on account of the stupid desires of the elders to have a son to enhance the family tree with a new branch. I wish they could have known that in this world there is only one tree: we call it the *Samsarvrichha* on the twigs of which we have our short sojourn.

Mother was advised to perform all sorts of religious and tantric rituals to propitiate gods for a son. She ate all sorts of herbal preparations made by the Vaidyas and the Sadhus. She heard the *Harivamsh Puranas* as it was believed that on listening to it a son was sure to be born. She spent months at Baidyanatha Dham worshipping Lord Shiva, and hearing, on the temple's back veranda, that *Purana* everyday. Several days she lived on *bael* leaves alone. She gave away all her jewellery to the poor in her mood of total surrender to God. Then I came 'squalling, into the world.' I wonder what a tragic waste it was to add to the world's population.

### **The Mahabharta in her family**

She lived with natural ease. She could tread on molten lava with trust in God. She faced life with such boldness which could come only when a person who suffers, and the person who thinks and acts, are not the same. In 1942-45 she experienced a series of shocks enough to unnerve the strongest souls. Her father was the patriarch of a great family; and her four brothers, two elder and two younger, were the four sturdy pillars of that family. My maternal grandfather resembled the sage Vishwamitra who was born *akshtriya* but through his *tapasya* had acquired the *Brahmanic* traits. My maternal grandfather was a Brahmin who made himself temperamentally a *kshtriya*. It seemed that in his village, and the places adjoining that, he ruled while the government simply complied with his wishes! My mother's eldest brother, Baldeva Mishra, was strong enough to have once smothered a wild boar in his embrace. He had saved Dr. Rajendra Prasad from a brutal attack by the imperial police while he was passing through Parbatta during the Freedom Movement. Her second brother, Bateshwara Mishra, was learned at law, and was an advocate of eminence at Monghyer. He had his rich library of law books. But the wrath of Destiny visited that family with ruthlessness. My maternal grandfather got embroiled into some land dispute which turned into a fratricidal war amongst the two important families, closely related and belonging to the same village. My mother's father was ambushed, and killed while going somewhere on his horse. Shortly after that, her first and second brothers were killed by their adversaries in bold encounters while on their way.



My mother's third brother, Kaleshwar Mishra, was preventively detained in jail as a measure to provide him security, and also to prevent him from participating in our nation's Freedom Struggle going on in full swing at that time. My mother's youngest brother Jageshwara Mishra was, at that time, a minor. Mother bore the waves of tragedy with fortitude. She had, at intervals, to go to Shernia to console and support her relations in the household rent with the sobs and lamentations of the three young widows. My mother guided their affairs with wisdom when there was none else to supervise things turning continuously difficult. My mother soon acquired remarkable knowledge of the agrarian problems, and became proficient in solving them. Her experiences gave her life a depth which I could never measure. I saw her never unhappy, never happy. She was always aesthetically delighting and sweet mannered, but I could see how her happiness and tragedy had melted into her serenity. I never saw her laughing; I never saw her weeping; I always saw on her face expressions which could come only if one transcends both by just accepting life as Destiny choreographs it.

### **My Mother and Father: their excellent chemistry**

The *Mundaka Upanishad* says:

“Two birds, beautiful of wing, close companions, cling to one common tree: of the two one eats the sweet fruit of the tree, the other eats not but watches his fellow.”<sup>5</sup>

Whilst one is at work, the other is the observing agent: he is often called the *karmadhyksha* (the supreme observer of things being done). The two birds, to whom the *Upanishad* refers, were perched on a tree of creation (*Samsarvrchha*). The leaves of this tree adopt two tracks for their growth and evolution. I cannot think of an imagery more expressive of my parents' life-style than the imagery of the two birds on a tree, one busy at work, and the other just a detached onlooker, perhaps advising and inspiring the other whilst continuously evaluating what was being done. My mother and father, in their wedded life, constituted one creative agency. The leaves evolve in their inner universe acquiring gradual ascent to the Supreme; and also on the track of social growth and evolution achieving better social solidarity, inter-dependence, and public good. This inner evolution leads one to feel, what Swami Satyananda Saraswati expresses in his kirtan<sup>6</sup> I would translate two stanzas of that :

That which is the Supreme Soul of the entire Universe  
That is the Soul of all the Creatures  
That Immortal Soul Sachhidanand, I am

Eternal is the Soul and perishable is the body  
The Soul which pervades through the selves of all  
That Eternal Soul Sachhidanand, I am

### **Hereconomic management**

I remember how after a rough journey we reached our village in 1942. That was the time when World War II was going on, and our nation was astir with patriotic passions which our Struggle for Freedom had generated. After my

father's arrest, we had no option but to leave Rosera to live in poverty and deprivation. We were the members of a large Hindu undivided family of which my grandfather, Grihinandan Jha, was the *karta*, wielding vast unquestioned authority. But he was ruling over a bankrupt empire. The family was managed with the trickle of finance which my father and my eldest uncle used to provide out of their earnings as school teachers.

Our house had mud walls and thatched roofs with creaking doors not strong enough to withstand even a child's push. Those days people bothered more about the vagaries of nature than about the knaveries of men. We had to live on the principles of peaceful co-existence with a lot of snakes which roamed freely in the house and its courtyard. Once I saw one big snake coiling on the top of our mosquito-net. We had a full view of its soft belly and the rhythm with which it moved. The shine of the black cobra was infinitely beautiful and mesmerizing. I loved observing its agility and shine which made this most poisonous snake a thing of beauty. But the snakes never troubled us, never even frightened us. When we clapped, they simply rattled their body with their hood erect, reminding us of the Seshnaag (the king of all serpents) on whose coil Lord Vishnu is said to relax. They came and went; and we watched and clapped. My mother planted a lot of creepers both on the fences all around the inner courtyard and on the roof made of bamboo lattice with a heavy layer of superjacent hay. Their leaves and fruits stood us in good stead as they helped us to keep the wolf from the door. Boiled rice and green *poro* leaves became for months our staple food. The green stains of the boiled *poro* leaves on the boiled rice on our plate created patterns as if they were emerald particles scattered on the white marble.

We owned a small farm which was cultivated by sharecroppers. Those days the Brahmins never ploughed fields. Once I asked the reason for this taboo. My hilarious cousin said that if they ploughed the land there was the risk of more Sitas emerging from the furrows. He told me how Sita had come out from the furrow when Maharaja Janaka had tilled the soil.

We were in difficult financial straits. Her worst problem was to finance litigation which followed my father's arrest. As it happens most often, her helpers in the matter were most often blood-suckers. Those who looked after the litigations needed a lot of money for conducting them. She could obtain money only by pawning her jewellery, the final resource of a Hindu lady before being reduced to complete penury. The moneylenders and the pawnbrokers are everywhere alike, callous and blood-thirsty. They adopted heinous stratagems to extract super profits. They would do everything to gulp the pawned jewellery by forging some pretexts, the most common being the delay beyond the contracted time for repayment. Often I developed the wish which had led Roskolnikov, in Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, to finish the cruel pawnbroker in a fit of frenzy. Besides, she had to raise money on high rate of interest. Quite often gold jewellery of 22 carat were pronounced by the crooks as only of 14 or 18 carats, even 9 carat. Our men, who took the jewellery to the shop, found the marks of gold on the touchstone beyond their comprehension. They believed that the touchstone, which looked like God Shaligrama, would never speak a lie. Where ignorance prevails, Deception rules.

### **Herspiritual pursuits**

She had come from a *Karmakandi* Brahmin family to another *Karmakandi* family, but she evolved to become *vedantic*. When she performed the ritual of the *pooja* as a part of our family tradition, she performed rituals as if they were performed by some *Upanishadic rishi*. My mother could not read the *Upanishads* as she did not know Sanskrit. But she got her ideas from the *Ramacharitmanasa*. On seeing her attainments, I felt Tulsidas was wholly correct in claiming that in his epic he had expressed all that is the best in the *Upanishads* and other *Shatras*. What was remarkable was her experiments in life with those ideas she acquired from her study and reflections. Her art of life and her personal philosophy made her accept the challenges of life without demur. That human life could be lived so beautifully, and with such intense joy, is an idea that I still treasure in my mind after nearly 40 years of her death. Only a little I have been able to tread on her line. But her ideas have helped me to swim through my life's tumults.

### **Attitudes towards food: and the art of proper eating**

Those days the preparation of food, and the way one ate food, had a clear *dharmic* dimension. Cooking in every household was done in the room wherein the family deity was worshipped. One could cook only after taking bath. Onions and garlic were never used in food preparation. Chicken preparation was wholly prohibited, in fact, inconceivable. Purity of mind was considered an essential ingredient in cooking. Cooking was a sacred function. The common practice was to dine on the mud-built veranda washed with cow dung mixed with water. Those who went for food had to remove their shoes in the courtyard itself. None could squat on the wooden plank for food without washing one's feet. It was obligatory to offer silently the food to god Govind by chanting *amantra*, humming in a low voice. None ever grumbled against the food provided. I never heard my parents grumbling against the quality of food. They felt, to find fault with what had become the *prasada* of Govind could be a sacrilege. One ate with concentration, mostly in silence. This attitude was maintained because food was considered divine (*annam brahmah*: food is God Himself). My mother was a strict taskmaster so that none of us deviated from the norms she prescribed for us.

We lived on food frugal by all standards. While at school I read about the concept of 'the balanced diet' containing appropriate proportion of carbohydrates, proteins, fat, vitamins and other minerals. The concept of 'balanced diet' did not accord well with the food I found many of my relations eating. Most of them never got balanced diet over years. There were many persons who lived on mere boiled rice with salt sprinkled. I saw many who lived full life without ever getting a balanced diet. Many did not get even bellyful of bare carbohydrates. Once I asked Dr. S.M.Nawab, FRCS, who was close to us, to clarify how they lived long without a balanced diet ever available to them. Dr Nawab was not only a distinguished doctor; he was also a thinker with deep insight. Before answering my question he asked me a question to know how they ate, and what their attitudes towards food were. I told him what I have just narrated. He found in what I said sufficient material to find out an answer to my problem. He explained to me Einstein's theory of Relativity, and his famous equation  $E = mc^2$ . If the

Universe is dramatized with speed twice the velocity of light the whole Universe would melt into Energy obliterating all formal distinctions. In the ultimate analysis, the formal differences simply do not exist. It was possible to draw from carbohydrates alone all that body needed. It depends on one's conversion mechanism. It is largely a psychic affair. It is the outlook towards food, and the state of mind of the person who eats, that matter. We have heard stories that many Rishis lived without food. Scientifically it is possible to live without food. Air could provide them with requisite energy as in the ultimate analysis air and food are the manifestations of the same energy. It is said that Villavmangalacharya, who sang the famous "Govind Damodar Strotam", lived on *bael* leaves for twelve years! My mother, who was listening to our conversation, to our amazement, came out with an excellent illustration. Meera had been given poison as *prasada*, so that she could die. She took that. It is said that the poison became *amrita* (heavenly nectar of immortality) the moment she gulped it. Two decades later I learned from Swami Satyanand Saraswati about the *Chakras* (the spiritual centres in one's body). I felt that the *Visudhi Chakra* must have transmuted the poison into *amrita*. Mind controls and conditions the chemistry of food we eat. Dr Nawab said that the concept of the 'balanced diet' is based on the law of average. As most persons have not been able to develop highly effective conversion mechanism, they are advised to take 'balanced diet'. It refers to what an average man can achieve at grosser levels. At subtler levels, things become different. The western medical science contemplates what is possible amongst the average men, at grosser levels. Dr. Nawab stressed that state of mind, at the time of eating, had a powerful role in the functioning of our body chemistry.

My parents were very particular about the taking of food. My father never forgot Gandhi's instructions on the right food, and the right way of eating. In such matters, my mother always shared my father's views. I found those instructions written on the wooden board that I found displayed in the Wardha Ashrama at Wardha which I visited it in 1986-1992 several times. Those instructions were thus stated by Mahatma Gandhi:

"Every one must follow certain norms in the matter of taking meals. There should be in one's food a proper proportion of gur, ghee, and vegetables. For one meal it is enough to have eight ounces of vegetables. It is improper to grumble about food. This sort of act is *himsa*. One should inform the manager about the deficiency. If something is raw, that should be left out. If desire for something more still remains, it is good. But one must not be angry. Every work should be done carefully. We belong to the same family; We must work with this sort of feeling. Even salt be taken only as much as is needed. One must not waste even water. I hope that everyone in the Ashrama would treat the things of the Ashrama as his, and also as the things held in trust for the poor. One should eat for health; and health is needed for rendering service to others. One should eat less, and with moderation. One should not create sound while eating. One should eat slowly and cleanly, considering food God's gift. Everyone should wash his utensils after taking meals; and should keep them properly."

**I saw her phantom presence before she died**

It was the late evening of December 8, 1973. I was at Patna, and my parents were at Laheriasarai. My wife was cooking food on a gas burner. I was studying W.W.Buckland's *A Textbook of Roman Law from Augustus to Justinian*, a very difficult and absorbing book. In a flash, I saw my mother standing before me, dressed in white, her face beaming with mystical smile. On her vivacious face mystical smile quivered, seemingly moving towards a subdued laughter. I was bewildered. I didn't know whether I stood on my head or on my heels. I told my wife my this strange experience. She was amazed. Throughout that night I remained awake trying to understand the mystery that I had experienced, but I failed to make out that. The first thing I did on November 9, 1973 was to ring up my son living with his grandparents at Laheriasarai. He told me that my mother was well. She asked him to convey her blessings to me. It was about 9.50 a.m. I came back to my residence. At 10.30 a.m, a friend of mine came running to my house. He advised me that I should immediately proceed to Laheriasarai where my father needed me 'at once'. In fact, my mother had expired shortly after my phone call. After listening to her grandson about my welfare, she ate rice and milk (as she used to do every Sunday), and sat on the wooden plank reciting Harinam (God's name) on her beads. She died. Perhaps she had a cardiac arrest. The great Sri Billvamanglacharaya in his 'Sri Govind Damodar Stotram' had wistfully prayed to his own tongue:

I seek, O Tongue, only one benefaction.  
When the Lord of Death catches me in His jaws  
You sing with great devotion and deep delight  
'Hey Govind, hey Damodar, hey Madhava.

[Translation mine.]

Life flowers in death. The day she died was the *puṇnima* (full moon night) of Agraḥanya. Death, the Great Reaper, could not have come at a better time. The harvest was ripe. Keats in his sonnet, 'Why did I laugh to-night', had said:

Verse, Fame and Beauty are intense indeed  
But Death intenser - Death is Life's high meed.

She was cremated on the bank of the holy Ganges at Semariaghat. Lakhs of devotees were taking holy bath in the river. I felt : they had assembled to pay homage to her departed soul.

This daughter of Mother India lived thus, and died thus. Her life had become, during the short period she visited this earth, a piece of poetry. I experienced its meaning at different planes. If I would not have seen her closely, I could not have believed that a daughter of Mother India could be so impeccable in the art of life. That flower has gone but its fragrance remains.

## PORTRAIT OF MY MOTHER

### NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 Bertrand Russell, *Autobiography* p. 444
- 2 Translated into Hindi by the author.
- 3 "I have no husband, no sons, no kinsmen, no brothers, no father, not even you, O Krsna."  
(Translated by Dr S. Radhakrishnan in his *The Bhagavad-Gita* p. 97.)
- 4 J. Bronowski writes in *The Ascent of Man* p. 56
- 5 Translated by Aurobindo in his *The Upanishads* p. 205
- 6 Which you can hear at my website [www.shivakantjha.org](http://www.shivakantjha.org)