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## **Glimpses of Santiniketan**

Originally retrieved from **Leela Majumder's** various accounts of Santiniketan, which were published collectively in Bengali bearing the title ***Kheror Khata*** (Ananda Publishers')

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After passing MA in 1931, I joined Santiniketan as a tutor. Although they used to call me a professor. The monthly payment was 85 rupees, from which 20 was deducted as boarding expenses. I was clueless what to do with the rest. There were no shops, nor any hotel or restaurant. Although I'm not sure what good it would be if there existed one. Everybody was so simple; plain clothing, barefooted. Shoes and sandals were a delicacy. The artist Satyen Bishi used to bring those from Calcutta. Rupees one and half would have brought us a lot of varieties.

Anyway, the job was joyful. When I met Tagore in Darjeeling, he had told me nothing. After returning to Santiniketan he wrote me a letter to join there for a year. That was



enough for me.

I was quite surprised to know that he is well informed regarding me! Had known and read my tales published in *Sandesh*. As a result, besides taking the responsibility of the little children, I was entrusted with junior-high English classes and BA Honours.

First day was the class of tenth standard. On the right side of the Mango Grove, there was *śāl Bithi*. A huge gate was there, covered with sweet smelling vines. What a place! Gentle breeze blowing, flavoured by flowery fragrances; but I was shocked to find that very wonderful spot allotted for the Maths teacher Jagadananda Roy. So, I was forced to take shelter under a Butter tree. Jagadananda was a true scholar, writer, a fine personality who was dedicated to students. In his anger he used to through books, heavy Maths books! Thus new copies became torn and rugged in a while; and nobody was interested to lend their own books to the teacher. As a solution, the class monitor routinely brought an old torn math-book.

I had only a rag, nor any riches or books. I sat upon the rag under the Butter tree, while the boys and girls sat respectively on the right and left sides, creating semicircles. To my slight wonder, I saw their hesitations to give me books. Well, the anecdote of book-throwing was unknown to me then!

As I travelled my eyes through the pages, I saw underlined words as well as Bengali meanings hand written side by side. There was a word ‘soot’, the meaning of which was written as ‘Jhol’ (Bengali term for soup). Wonderstruck, I asked the owner, “Why, Rashbihari, you have written such a meaning?” There was a peel of laughter among others.



The students explained that he is *East-Bengali* (with unique pronunciations). In the kitchen he was demanding fish-soup, by asking as ‘Jhool’ (Bengali term for Soot). Others corrected him to pronounce ‘Jhol’. The very next day when Tanay Da taught ‘soot’ as ‘Jhool’, Rashbihari thought him as an East-Bengali. Thus he wrote ‘Jhol’ beside that word!!

Another day was a day of winter and the class was consisted of junior students. The Butter fruits were falling in finger numbers. I myself couldn’t concentrate, how can I expect others? Suddenly, my eyes were stuck upon a boy; sitting aside, resting his back on a *śāl* tree, reading something with full fledged concentration; his round eyes were widely open. Such a concentration can’t be expected from an English Grammar book.

Angered and annoyed, I ordered, “Kanu, bring that book to me!” A feeble answer came, “well...you might not want to read it...” . This had made me more angry.

When the book was handed over to me I noticed the sketch of a dark cave, from which an awful Dragon like figure was poking out. The red-letter fonts read ‘*The Terror of the Tibetan Gumpha*’ under which was written ‘*Adventure Series no. 22*’. I advised him to leave that book to me ; also opined that it’s a bad thing to bring story books into the class.

Our evenings were the time to meet the Poet. He used to wear simple Khadi kurta and white dhoti. A prominently powerful figure.

He was ever curious about my daily works, often telling a few jokes. I was used to be accompanied by Purnima Tagore, the granddaughter of Debendranath. One day he asked about my class teachings. I said that I have delivered a write-up on cow, and one of the students had written “The cow is a domesticated vegetarian”.



He sat up like a spring and exclaimed, “What! But that’s the definition of me. Me too is a domesticated vegetarian!” Such a funny and jocular man he was. He used to eat vegetarian, with lots of fruits. An early riser, his first work of the day was to sit with painting materials. Our strolling route was beside ‘Udayana’. If we had heard “Ahem” while passing by – we dared to venture in. However, in some days of total silence and calm, it was widely understood that the creator has become one with his creation. Nobody assayed to go in then.

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So many prolific personalities used to flock together in the ‘Uttarayana’ house for evening chitchat. When Tagore used to join such gatherings, it usually turned out all the more entertaining. In such a gathering I heard about an incident involving Tagore and Jagadish Bose.

The friendship of Tagore and Bose was widely known. As age gained upon both of them, they were becoming all the more forgetful. One day Tagore requested his daughter-in-law Pratima Devi not to prepare lunch for him, as he had an invitation to dine with Jagadish.

The very next day he groomed himself, took a companion with him, and went straight to Bose’s home. The members were extremely happy seeing him. The two veteran friends chatted for hours and eventually the lunch time passed. Surprisingly nobody called them to have lunch. Then the Poet suspected that Jagadish has totally forgotten that very lunch invitation.

At last Tagore stood up to take leave. Jagadish, along with his wife, came to the stairs to see him off. Suddenly Jagadish remembered something and reminded Tagore, “Don’t you



forget to come tomorrow for lunch. I do hope you remember that? I have totally lost it till now.”

Tagore—with a grand smile—replied, “Oho! I have lost it too! I forgot to mention a very important thing. I won’t be available tomorrow due to some urgency. I came today to inform you that.”

Coming down the stairs Tagore smilingly commented to his companion, “Can you see how I have managed it? Poor thing! He has totally lost it.” Not a single word came from his companion’s side. He was under tremendous confusion of who had lost it and who hadn’t!!

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Once, there was a tent of circus in the premises of Surul. We went from Santiniketan in a team and bought tickets with four anna (twenty-five paise) and sat on a bench aside. At that time there was no electricity. A huge Hassaque was hanging there. Two owners, near about ten artists, a few mangy dogs, a lean horse and a wicked and desperate servant—this was the team. Noticing the wicked servant, the senior owner said, “This guy is very wicked, if he gets a chance, he will spoil all the game. It is far better to bury him alive into the earth. So let’s dig a hole for him!”

At once the junior owner said, “Stop a bit, first of all he should hang the Hassaque up from the ceiling, and then you will do your deed. Otherwise you will recruit me for that same!”

Finishing the proper hanging of the light, a hole was dug by the desperate servant



himself. Many an audience visited that hole leaving their seats for conforming that nothing or nobody was there. Then the servant was driven into the hole and soiled up sturdily. Thereafter the circus went on for one and half hours.

Almost all games were very easy to play and we all thought there was no need to inter him alive for this. When I was totally annoyed and thought to leave the audience seat, astonishingly I heard the proclamation of the last game.

The senior owner said, “Let’s see the dance of living doll. But we are very poor men, so we couldn’t collect the adequate amount to repair the tent. How can we buy a living doll? Hence we have made it ourselves.”

Announcing this, the two owners brought out two dirty handkerchiefs from their pockets, and showed them off to all. Some audience judged those by their own hands and made it clear that there was no dexterity on those. In fact they were too much filthy!

Getting back the handkerchiefs from audience, the senior owner tied six knots for head, waist, two hands and two legs in each of the handkerchiefs and showed them up with this new look again for all. Thereafter laying them side by side over the palm, he told, “As a dead doll can’t dance, so I am just making him alive.” Telling this he gave two whiffs to those, and at once the dolls bounced up greeting us a salute. Then those things started dancing holding on their waists together over the palm of the owner. While dancing, they jumped into the floor at a time, all on a sudden from the palm of the owner, and presented a lot of variety by raising their hands or kicking up their legs! We were totally stuck-dumb! We hadn’t observed any thread or thread like something anywhere and the owners were budging





their hands not for a single time.

We noticed the anger of the senior owner because wrongly the junior owner trampled one of the dolls down. Wading on with a fist to the junior, the senior buffeted a good deal of spurn on his back. In the mean time, another doll started mounting on the junior one by his leg.

Then the senior owner became furious. “You have done enough, no more! You are just crossing your limit!” Saying this he again picked them up on the palm. But still then there was no sign of decrement of their dynamism. They were continuously jumping and showing their punch. As the owner whiffed on them, they laid down. Again the owner came close to us to check the doll in the form of the handkerchiefs and taking them in my own hands I realised that this is two simple doll made up by knots in dirty handkerchieves. No faucet or engines were there!

In front of our eyes the knots of the dolls were disentangled, cleaned and pocketed. The finishing bell rang. When the audience were preparing to return home, the senior owner said, “Oh! The servant is still now earthed! If he isn’t here, then who will maintain all the things to keep safely?” Pronouncing this, the two owners again dug him out from the earth.

Coming out, the servant was looking around the arena drowsily; then the hole was soiled by the servant himself. Thereafter he untied the rope, which helped the Hassque to hang from ceiling. There were really no words in our mouths! I just can’t grasp any explanation of this surprising event even today!!

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## Leela Majumder

Story writers are many, but how many of them are actual story tellers? *Leelu Pishi*, as Satyajit Ray used to call her—is one such gem of a scribe. She holds two gold medals in English literature, but her grip in Bengali story making is peerless and obviously unputdownable. A life spanning a century (1908-2007) has been dedicated to the development of juvenile literature. She taught in Darjeeling, Santiniketan and Kolkata—but finally settled for writing at the corner of her home. She and Satyajit chalked out the master plan regarding the publication of evergreen *Sandesh* magazine. The stories that Leela aunty have spun are well-paralleled to those very stories of our granddames which made all of us awestruck on wintry afternoons—part mysterious, part fun. A receiver of bouquet of awards – she even possesses most prestigious Rabindra Award and Ananda Award in her shelf.