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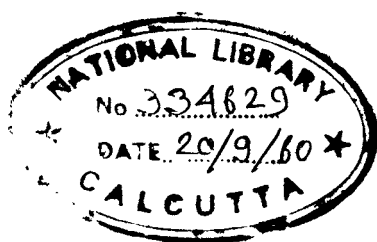
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LETTERS TO HIS WIFE.

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Rabindranath : a family group



## OLD LETTERS

RABINDRANATH TAGORE

I found a few old letters of mine,  
carefully hidden in her box — a few small  
toys for her memory to play with.

With a timorous heart she tried to  
steal these trifles from time's turbulent  
stream, and said, "These are mine  
only !"

Ah, there is no one now to claim  
them, who can pay their price with  
loving care, yet here they are still.

Surely there is love in this world to  
save her from utter loss, even like this  
love of hers that saved these letters  
with such fond care.

Rabindranath enshrined the memory of his wife, Mrinalini Devi ( 1872-1902 ), in a slender volume of deeply moving poems to which he gave the name *Smaran* ( In Memoriam ). The above is one such poem, translated by the Poet himself and included in his book *Fruit-Gathering* ( NO. XLVII ). It has a peculiar aptness as a preface to the letters published in the following pages.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

RABINDRANATH TAGORE

These letters, dating from 1890 to 1901, were written by the Poet to his young wife, Mrinalini Devi, during their short separations. They had been married seven years before the date of the first letter, Mrinalini Devi being only eleven years of age and the Poet twenty-two at the time of marriage. Mrinalini Devi came from a comparatively obscure Brahmin family, had little formal education and was quite unsophisticated as the result of a childhood spent in the country, ( Fultala of letter 34 ).

These letters cover a period of twelve years when the Poet's genius was blossoming richly and they reveal an unexpected side of his character, full of anxious solicitude, tender affection and a farsightedness mingled with a deep sense of responsibility. We have intimate glimpses of his personal life and witness the first stirrings of its later sublimation into a life of service and dedication.

The letters have been rendered into English by Lila Majumdar and are a selection from the first book of the *Chithipatra* series published by the Visva-Bharati.—*Ed.*

Letter 2. Written on board *Siam*. Friday, 19 August, 1890.

We shall reach Aden today and touch land after a long time. But we may not go ashore for fear of infection. We shall have to change ship as soon as we arrive and that means a great deal of trouble.

I cannot tell you how sick I have been this time. For three days I brought up whatever I took in, my head grew dizzy, my body was in a whirl — I was absolutely bedridden — indeed I wonder how I managed to keep alive through it all.

On Sunday night I felt my soul leave my body and go to Jorasanko. You were lying on the edge of the big bed, Beli and Baby by your side.

I caressed you a little and said 'Little wife, remember that I left my body on Sunday night and came to see you — when I get back from Europe I shall ask you whether you saw me'.

Then I kissed Beli and Baby and came back.

Did you ever think of me when I was so ill? I longed to come back to you. Nowadays I always feel that there is no place like home. After I return this time, I shall not stir out again.

I took a bath today after a whole week. But there is no pleasure in bathing because the sea-water makes my whole body sticky and tangles my hair in a horrible gummy way — it feels funny. I think I shall not bathe again till I leave the ship.

It will be another week before we reach Europe. Once there, how glad I shall be to get ashore again. I am sick of the sea all day and night.

The sea however is quite calm nowadays, the ship does not roll so much and I am no longer ill. I lie on deck all day, in a long chair and talk with Loken or think or read.

At night too, we make our beds on deck and never enter our cabins if we can help it. The instant one goes indoors one feels uncomfortable.

It rained suddenly last night and we had to drag our beds to where the rain could not reach us. Since then it has been raining continuously but we had beautiful, sunny weather yesterday.

There are two or three little girls on board. They have lost their mother and are going to England with their father. I feel so sorry when I look at them. The father is always with them but he does not know how to dress them properly or to do anything.

They walk in the rain and if he objects they tell him they like to do it. He only laughs and I think he has not the heart to stop them because they play so happily.

They remind me of my own babies. I dreamed of Beli last night, that she had come on board and was looking so lovely

that I cannot describe it. Tell me what to bring them when I return home.

If you answer this letter as soon as you receive it, I might get your reply while I am still in England. Remember that Tuesdays are mail days. Kiss the children for me.

Letter 5. Kaligram. December, 1890.

I arrived at Kaligram today. It has taken me three days travelling through various places. First the big river, then the little river with trees on either side beautiful to see. The river narrows gradually till it is no more than a canal with high banks, and the air is stuffy.

Beyond this, the water rushes out in a strong current and it took nearly twenty-five men to hold our boat back.

There is a huge lake named Chalanbil, from which the water flows into the river. We pushed upstream with great difficulty and after avoiding many dangers, entered the lake.

Here the water stretched all around us with clumps of grass at intervals, as if the summer rain had collected in a vast meadow. Sometimes the boat touched bottom and had to be pushed and pulled for an hour or so before it would float again. The mosquitoes were terrible.

The long and the short of it is that I do not care for the lake at all.

Afterwards there were small rivers and little lakes and at last we arrived. I hate to think that I shall have to take the same route back to Birahimpore.

This river has no current. Slime floats on the surface, with clumps of growth here and there and an odour like that of the stagnant village tanks, and I expect there will be plenty of mosquitoes at night too. If I find it too much I shall run away straight to Calcutta. Indeed I felt like going home immediately



when I read my sweet Belu-rani's letter. She misses me, does she ? With her tiny little mind, how ever can that be ? Tell her I shall bring back loads of "odd" and jam for her.

I dreamed of the Baby last night, that I was fondling him and liking it. Has he started to say a few words now ? I seem to remember Bela talking fifteen to the dozen at his age. It is not cold there ? I shiver in the bitter cold here.

They tied the boat in a stuffy place last night and drew down the curtains. The closeness woke me up and on top of it some people started singing at that hour of the night ( 1 or 2 A. M. ) "How much longer will you sleep ? Awake,-awake, beloved !" The boatman stopped the singing but the words rang in my ears continuously "Awake, awake, beloved !" till I felt ill. Finally I raised the curtains and fell asleep towards dawn.... I may be able to leave here after a fortnight but I am not yet certain.

Letter 11. Shahjampur. 26 June, 1892.

It has become rather stormy here since yesterday with the wind blowing from all quarters, rain at intervals and the sky overcast with clouds. I am inclined to believe the weather forecast of a terrific storm tomorrow. I wish you would come down from the second floor rooms and spend tomorrow in the first floor drawing-room ; only, if there really is a storm, all my advice will be useless because you will not receive this letter till the day after tomorrow....

I felt depressed after reading your letter yesterday. If, under all circumstances, we have the strength to keep to the straight and true path, there is no reason why our peace of mind should be disturbed by the evil conduct of other people. I believe that, with a little effort, one may train one's mind in such a manner.

I have made a resolution myself to try always to do my duty unmoved by anything and not to be in the least discouraged by

what others may say or do. How far I shall succeed I do not know.

If every day one performs each task tirelessly and with personal care, such discontent with oneself and with one's environment will never have the chance to grow. In whatever circumstances one may find oneself, it is always possible to perform one's daily duties cheerfully and with satisfaction. Should by any chance some dissatisfaction arise in the heart, the more it is cherished the more unjustifiably it will grow. I must try to consider it as insignificant, and of course do my utmost to remedy it ; and what I cannot achieve I must try to accept with indomitable courage, as the good will of God. There is no other way to be truly happy upon this earth....

Letter 13. On the boat. Shelidah. 1892.

I felt sad on reading your letter before I left Shelidah today. In a way it is just as well that you are coming back, otherwise I would not feel like returning to Calcutta and I would have hated it, once I arrived there. Besides, I have not been keeping so well lately and have often felt the need of your company.

Yet I know full well that the longer you remain in Sholapur the better for you. I had dearly hoped that the children would come back disciplined, trained and improved. However, nothing in this life is wholly within attainment. One must always do one's duty as far as is possible in those circumstances under which one must eventually live. One must do as well as one can and it is not possible to do any more.

Little wife, do not cherish discontent in your heart, no good will ever come of that. One must go through life cheerfully and contentedly, but with a strong purpose. I am myself of a discontented turn of mind and accordingly I suffer meaninglessly.

But you must needs be very cheerful, otherwise life will become gloomy.

I shall do my utmost, but little one, you must not be secretly unhappy and dissatisfied. You know, my dear, how I worry over trifles, but you do not know how I have to sit all alone and reason with myself to calm down. Dispel these discontented moods of mine, do not share them.

If you have already started, we shall meet in Calcutta. I shall try to take you to Orissa with me. The place is very healthy. I have already let Father know something of my wishes, and he understands.....But do not be too hopeful.

I am inclined to think you will receive this letter too in Sholapur, because some eight or ten days will probably elapse beyond the appointed date before you finally make up your mind to set out. However that remains to be seen....

Letter 16. Shelidah. June, 1898.

I returned from Dacca today and found your letter here. I shall complete my business at Kaligram quickly and proceed to Calcutta to make adequate arrangements about everything.

But my dear, do not upset yourself needlessly. Try to accept everything that happens in a calm, quiet and contented manner. It is the only rule I always bear in mind and try to practise in life. I am not always successful, but if you too would cherish this peace of mind, I think I could gain strength from our mutual efforts and find the peace that is born of contentment.

Of course you are much younger than I, and your experience of life is very limited, but in a way your nature is more quietly controlled and more patient than mine. That is why it is not so necessary for you to protect your mind from every kind of disappointment. But in everybody's life, at some time or other,

there come great crises ; at such times the cultivation of patience and the habit of contentment stand one in good stead.

Then it is that one feels that the little losses and oppositions, the insignificant hurts and pains with which our minds have been beset and preoccupied, are of no real consequence.

Let us give love and do good to others and perform our duties to one another with a sweet cheerfulness ; then it will not matter what happens. After all, life is not for very long and all our joys and sorrows are subject to perpetual change.

To find things going contrary to our self-interest, to suffer loss, to be deceived — it is hard to take such things lightly ; but unless we do so, the burden of life grows unbearable and it becomes impossible to preserve the high ideals of our souls.

If we fail to do so, if day after day we lay waste our lives in dissatisfaction and distraction, in a continual struggle with the petty adversities of circumstance, then indeed our lives will have been lived in vain. A great peacefulness, a generous detachment, selfless affection and disinterested service, these are the things that make life worth-while.

If you can discover peace within yourself and can give comfort to those around you, then there will be more purpose in your life than in that of an empress. My dear, if you allow your mind to fret unchecked, it will turn against itself. Most of our sorrows are created by ourselves.

Do not be annoyed with me for lecturing you in such high sounding words. You do not know the intense urge of the soul with which I speak. That the strong ties of my love and respect for you and my easy comradeship with you may now grow still closer, that this immaculate peacefulness and joy may grow dearer than anything else in life, that all the little griefs and despairs of everyday may grow insignificant in comparison—this is what attracts my eyes nowadays as something intensely desirable.

There is a strong headiness in the passionate love between a young man and woman, but this you must have realised in your own life. It is in maturer age, in the vicissitudes of a life more varied and extended, that a true, lasting, deep, controlled and wordless love manifests itself. As one's own world grows larger, the outer world moves farther away ; that is why, in a way, the larger one's household grows, the more occasion there is to be by ourselves, and the ties of intimacy bring us all the closer to each other.

There is nothing more beautiful than the human soul. Whenever one observes it from close quarters, whenever one is brought face to face with it, then it is that true love is born. And then there remain no more illusions, there is no need to deify each other, there are no more passionate storms in union or at parting, but there radiates a pure light of natural joy and undoubting dependence, whether near together or far apart, in security and in danger, in want as well as in wealth.

I realise you have known sorrow on my account, but this too I know for certain that, because of this sorrow you have borne, you will one day find a great happiness. The happiness one may find in the forgiveness and suffering of love is not to be found in the fulfilment of desire and in self-satisfaction.

Of late it has come to be the only desire of my soul that our lives may be easy and straight-forward ; our way of living be without outward show and full of goodness ; our wants be few ; our ideals high ; our efforts selfless ; and that our country's needs may be of more importance than our own. Even though our own children move far away from this ideal, may you and I remain, to the very end, the support of each other's humanity and the refuge of each other's world-weary soul, and so bring our lives to a beautiful conclusion.

That is why I am so anxious to take you away from that stone-temple of self-interest which is Calcutta, far away into

the lonely countryside. In Calcutta there is no way of forgetting profit and loss, mine and thine ; there, one is always beset by petty material things, till in the end the high purpose of life is broken up into a thousand pieces. But over here, a little is quite enough and the false may never be mistaken for the true.... Here it is not so difficult to remember the injunction :

Accept with resignation and a stout heart  
Whatsoever may befall thee—whether joy or sorrow, pain or pleasure.

Letter 19. Calcutta, 1899.

What *are* you doing ? If you give yourself up in this way to your own anxieties, whatever will happen to you in this life ? As long as one lives, death is certain to knock at one's door many times. There is nothing so sure as death. If you do not teach yourself to accept God as your one true friend in the face of death, there will be no limit to your unhappiness.

Nitu is better and is gradually improving. For a short time a doctor had to stay with us all night and give him his medicines and so on. He did not come yesterday as there was no more need for him, so I had to shoulder the night's responsibilities all by myself.... There is cause for hope now, but since nothing is certain, one should be prepared for all eventualities:.... You are only prostrated with grief, I am exhausted with work.

Nowadays I am not much afraid of death in any form, but I am worried about you. Such a desolate, despairing, lost soul as yours appears to me an object greatly to be pitied.

Letter 20. 1899.

I try to get rid of that anxiety for the children which always keeps gnawing at my mind. We should always do, to the best of our ability, whatever is needful for their welfare and good

training, but it is a mistake to keep our minds preoccupied with this. They will live their own lives and be good, bad or indifferent as the case may be. Though they are our children, yet they are separate beings and we have no authority over the paths they will tread with their joys and sorrows, their good deeds and bad, their work and their achievements, for all time. We must simply carry out our duties and not pathetically and longingly await results.

It is in God's hands, the kind of men and women they will grow into. We must not cherish too high hopes for them.

This tenderness of mine for my own son, this urgent ambition of mine that he should excel over all — these things are born of my pride, to a great extent. I have no right to expect so much of my son. So many peoples' sons fall into difficulties, but how little sympathy we have for them! No matter how much one might try to achieve in this life, the results vary according to circumstances and no one can control them. Therefore, only this much is in our hands, that we should do our duty and not permit ourselves to be uselessly distressed about results.

We must build up the strength to accept both good and evil easily.... Whenever the mind is inclined to be disturbed, I must control myself and learn to be free; I must remind myself that I am separate from the joys and griefs and effects of this world, that I do not belong to this world alone. What connection had I with this world in the eternity which was my past, and what place will these joys and sorrows, this good and evil, these gains and losses, have in the eternity which is my future?

Wherever and for whatever length of time we may live, we must execute our duties with care and we do not need to worry about anything else....

Letter 25. Calcutta, December, 1900.

I was delighted to receive two letters from you today, but I have no time to write an adequate reply for I must go to Bolpur today.

I read the draft of my sermon to Father today and he asked me to amplify certain passages, so I must get down to it at once for I have but an hour or so.

You do not have to try very hard to make me happy, your sincere love will be enough. Of course if you and I could be comrades in all our work and in all our thoughts it would be splendid, but we cannot attain all that we desire.

If you could share with me whatever I do and whatever I learn, I should be happy. If I could let you know whatever I wish to know and if you too could learn with me whatever I wish to learn — that would be happiness indeed. If we would only try to go forward together in all things in life, progress would be easy. I do not wish to leave you behind in anything, but, at the same time, I am nervous about forcing you to do anything against your inclination.

Everyone has his own tastes, desires and rights. It is not in your hands to identify yourself wholly with my wishes and inclinations. Therefore instead of fretting about it, if you sweeten my life with your love and care and try to spare me needless pain, your efforts will be of tremendous value to me.

Letter 28. Shelidah, 1901.

I could not write to you yesterday because of the ceremonies which take place when the tenants pay their New Year rents. I had arrived at Shelidah on the evening of the day before. The empty house yawned at me. I had thought I would enjoy the quiet of the lonely house after the various harassments of



many days. But the mind was at first unwilling to enter alone where we have always been accustomed to live together and where many tokens of such living are in evidence. Particularly when I went into the house, tired out after my journey and with no one to look after my wants, to be glad and to show tenderness, it all seemed very empty. I tried to read but I could not.

When I came in after looking over the garden and everything else, the empty room lit by a kerosene lamp appeared emptier.

The upstairs rooms seemed more vacant. I came down again, trimmed the lamp and tried to read once more. But it was no use.

We had dinner early and went to bed. I slept in the west room upstairs and Rathi in the east room. It was really cold at night ; I had to cover myself with my woollen rug. In the day too it is fairly cold.

The rent-collecting was completed yesterday with music and prayers and so on. In the evening a party of kirtan-singers came to the court-house and we listened to them till eleven at night.

Your herb garden is full now. But the greens have been planted so closely that they have no room to grow. We shall send you some of your greens with the other things. A number of pumpkins have been put away. The rose-trees that Nitu sent are in full bloom but the greater part of them are the odourless variety. He was cheated badly. The tube roses, the gardenias, the malati, the passiflora, the mchedi are flowering profusely. The lady-of-the night too is in flower, but there is no perfume. I think flowers lose their perfume in the rainy season.

The tank is full to the brim. The sugarcane in front has grown well. The fields all around are full of corn to the very limit, all green without a break. Everybody asks, "When will mother be here ?".....

Letter 29. Shelidah, June 1901.

When the rent-collecting celebrations were over I set my hand to my writing again. Once engrossed in my writing I am like a landed fish which has found the water again. Now the loneliness of this place gives me complete protection, the little details of life no longer touch me and I very easily forgive those who have been my enemies.

I can easily understand why you feel oppressed by loneliness ; indeed I would have been happy could I share with you my enjoyment in this mood, but it is something which no one may give to another.

When you leave the crowds of Calcutta and find yourself in the midst of the emptiness here, you will not like it in the beginning and even when you do get used to it, you will feel a repressed impatience within you. But tell me what else I can do when my life grows barren in Calcutta. That is why my temper is upset and I fret against every little thing and I cannot sincerely forgive everyone, cannot abandon strife and so preserve my own peace of mind.

Besides, Rathi and the others can never be properly educated there, everyone is so restless. For all these reasons you must resign yourself to a sentence of exile. Perhaps later on, when I can afford it, I shall be able to select a better place, but I shall never be able to bury all my powers in Calcutta.

Now heavy clouds gather and darken the sky and the rain begins to fall. I have shut all the glass windows of my room downstairs and while I write to you I enjoy the sight of the rain falling. You could never see so wonderful a sight from your first floor room over there. The gentle, dusky, new summer rain over the green fields all round me looks beautiful. ....

I am writing a critical essay on "Meghdut". If I could portray in my essay the deep duskiness of this heavy summer day, if I

could give to my readers the greenness of Shelidah's green fields in some permanent form, how would it be? In my books I have said so many things in so many ways, but where can I find this array of clouds, this movement of branches, this ceaseless fall of rain, this thick-shadowed embracement of earth and sky?

How easily, how naturally this lonely rainy day gathers over the solitude of the fields, over the earth and the water and the sky; how the sunless mid-afternoon of idle cloudy June gathers around me, and yet I can leave no trace of all this in my writings!

No one will ever know how I strung these words together in my mind, or when or where, in the long leisurely hours and in this lonely house. The rain has stopped after a particularly heavy shower, so this is the time to send my letter to the post.

Letter 30. Shelidah, 1901.

.....Our mangoes are almost finished and unless you send us some more we shall be in difficulties. We are having very simple meals and keeping very fit....I brought the cook along with me, but how are you managing? Over here Kunja and Phatik are carrying on quite smoothly between the two of them. Shelidah is very quiet without Bipin's loud voice. I like it here because everything is done without any great to do. When Bipin is around, one feels that the whole world is set about with the flurry of endless business, so that no one has any time to breathe.

I like work to be done without a word, silently and with regularity. I do not like much show but that everything should be done easily, neatly and efficiently, according to rule, simply and silently.

One must acknowledge this advantage about living alone, that there is no evidence of any vigorous effort or much para-

phernalia around one. The mind, therefore, feels free. My heart feels light to think that there is no turmoil in the world merely because I exist. Now my leisure hours seem very expansive, very extended, because no one rushes about me, panting and shouting and giving orders.

At the right time each morning I have two mangoes, then rice for midday lunch, two more mangoes in the afternoon, and hot *luchis* and fried things at night — simple and regular meals, so that one feels hungry and can enjoy them, and there need be no frequent calls for medicines.

If we cannot simplify our lives in one way or another there is no room for true happiness, all the space for happiness and contentment is taken up by material things and noises and arrangements and accounts. The very search for ease makes ease impossible.

The truest fulfilment of manhood consists in less stress on the affairs of the outer world and more concentration on the affairs of the mind. If our lives are loaded down with little matters we must needs exclude the greater things; insignificant matters complicate our lives and we are embroiled in strife with everyone.

Day and night my inmost being yearns for free open spaces, not only the freedom of the skies, winds and light, but freedom from the business of life, from arrangements and furnishings, from the display of thought and effort.

Our meals and clothes and conduct of life must all be simple, restrained, moderate and neat. There must be a natural and calm frugality everywhere, no drawing rooms or dining rooms and no luxury, plain bare beds for all, peace and contentment, no rivalry or enmity or arrogance. Then only will our lives have the chance to make themselves fruitful....

Letter 31. Shelidah, 1901.

It is very hot here. I am quite fit but I am not sleeping well at night. I wake up late in the night and sit in the moonlight. There is no dew at all.

As I sat there last night I remembered that you had spent many evenings and nights in deep sorrow, here on this terrace. I too have many painful memories associated with this terrace.

If you could sit here in the moonlight, late at night, I believe your mind would once more become overcast.

Nowadays I see this world as in a mirage. Should any regrets arise in my mind, they slide off like water on a lotus leaf. I tell myself that before a hundred years are over this history of our joys and sorrows and loves will fade into nothing. Besides, when I gaze at the limitless celestial sphere and when I bring my soul face to face with Him who stands as the silent witness of this infinity, then all our transitory joys and sorrows, in their very minuteness, are brushed away like cobwebs and may be seen no more.

Letter 34. Santiniketan July, 1901.

I have just come back after leaving Bela in her new home. It is not what you may imagine from a distance ; Bela is quite contented there. There is no doubt that she likes her new way of life. We are now no longer necessary to her.

I have come to the conclusion that, at least for a short period immediately after marriage, a girl should keep away from the company of her parents and give herself unrestricted opportunity for uniting herself with her husband in every way. The presence of her parents in the midst of this union interferes with it, because the habits and tastes of her husband's family and her father's are not the same and there are bound to be differences of opinion. Such being the case, with her parents near at hand

a girl cannot forget her old ways and identify herself wholly with her husband. Since one must give away one's daughter why try to retain any influence over her ? In such circumstances one must consider the girl's welfare and happiness. What is the use of her considering our happiness or misery and adding paternal attachments to those of her husband's home ?

Remember that Bela is quite happy and try to console your own grief at separation. I can say with certainty that had we clung round them the result would not have been good. Because they are far away, the affection between them and us will always remain the same. When they come to us for the Pujah holidays or when we go to them, we shall all enjoy a deep and fresh delight.

In every kind of love there should be a certain amount of separation and detachment. No good ever comes of completely swamping each other. If Rani too goes far away after her marriage, it will be good for her. Of course she will be near us for the first couple of years but, after that, as soon as she is old enough, she should be sent entirely away from us for her own good.

The education, tastes, customs, language and way of thinking of our family are different from those of all other families in Bengal ; that is why it is all the more necessary for our girls to remove themselves from us after marriage. Otherwise every little detail of her new life might be so irksome to the girl, that it might influence her respect for and dependence upon her husband. All the faults of Rani's nature will be corrected as soon as she is separated from her parental home, but she will never get rid of her old associations if she keeps in close contact with us.

Think of yourself. If I had lived in Fultala after marrying you, your nature and your behaviour would have been quite different. Where one's children are concerned, one should

entirely disregard one's own happiness. They were not born for our happiness. Our only happiness consists in their welfare and in the fulfilment of their lives.

All day yesterday memories of Bela's childhood kept coming back to my mind. How carefully I reared her with my own hands ; how naughty she would be, penned in by her pillows ; how she would shout and hurl herself on any small child of her own age whom she met ; how greedy she was but how good-natured ; how I would bathe her myself in the Park Street house ; how I gave her warm milk to drink at night at Darjeeling. I keep remembering the time when first my love for her stirred in my heart. But she does not know of these things and it is better so. Let her bind herself to her new home without pain and fulfil her life with faith and affection and household duties. Let there be no regrets in our hearts.

Arriving in Santiniketan today I am steeped in peacefulness. One cannot imagine from afar how necessary it is to come away like this from time to time. Surrounded by the limitless sky and the wind and the light, I am, as it were, nursed in the arms of the primal mother.