

SHOHLA BALA DAS

A LOOK BEFORE AND AFTER

BY

S. B. DAS

CUTTACK

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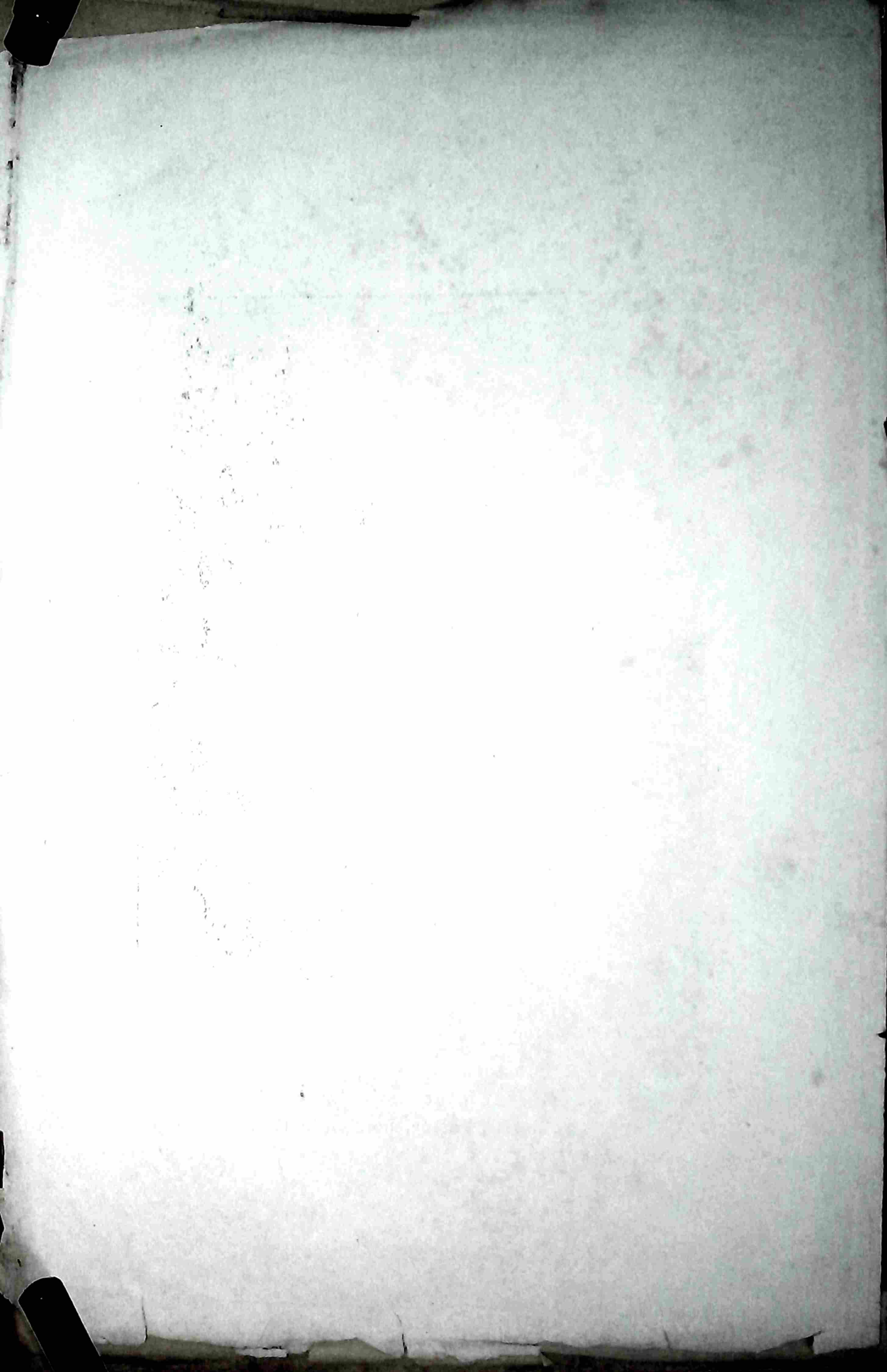
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Kumari Shoilabala Das,
presented at their Majesties Court at
St. James, Palace, London in 1907

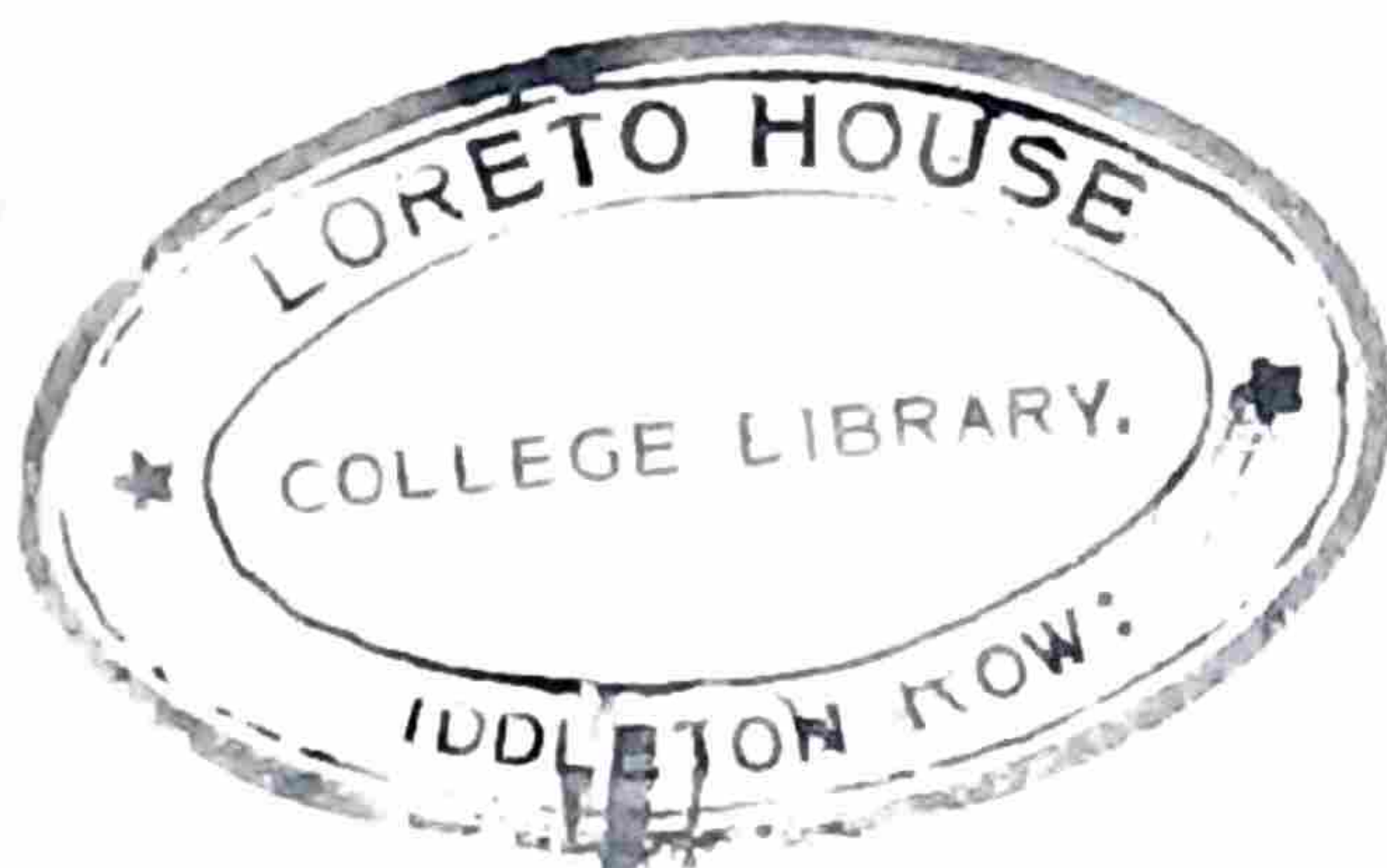


S. B. DAS

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S. B. Das

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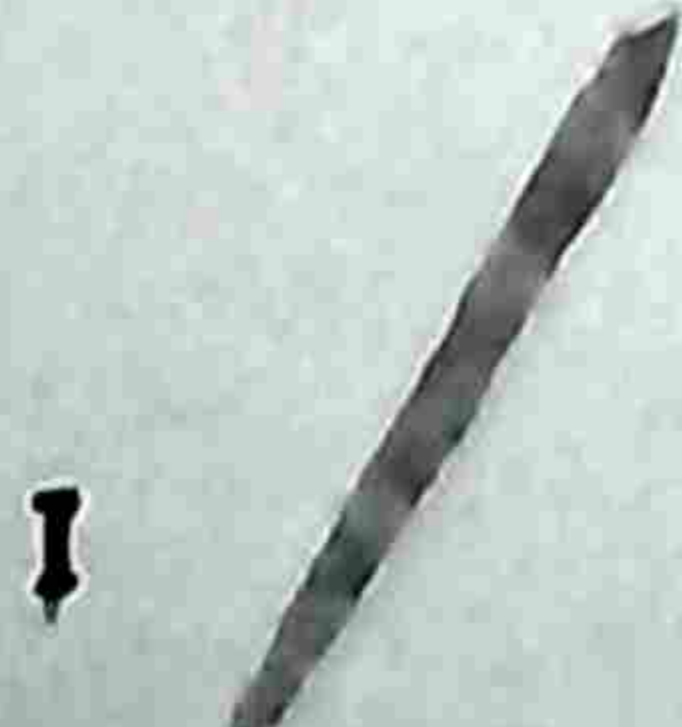
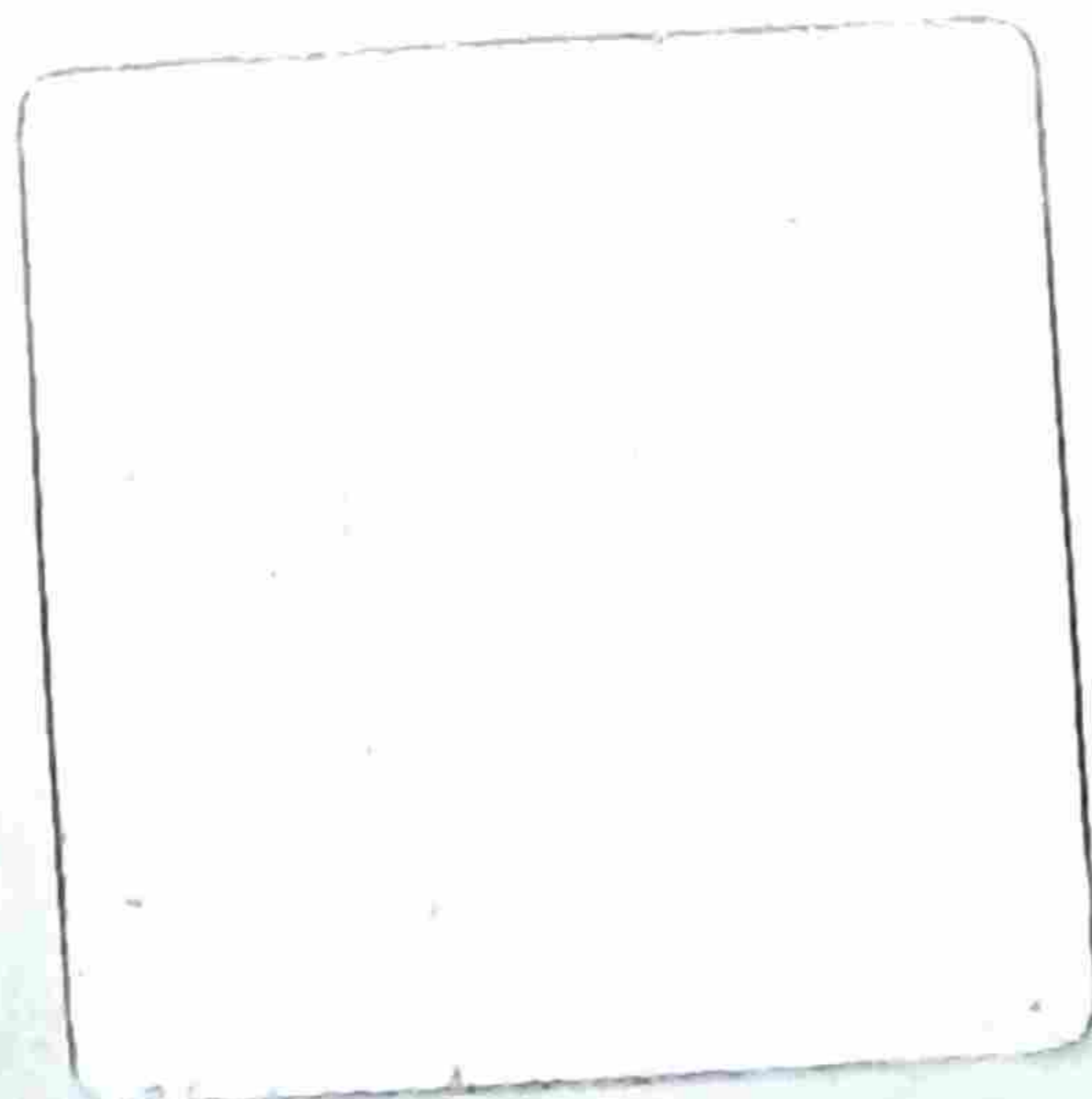


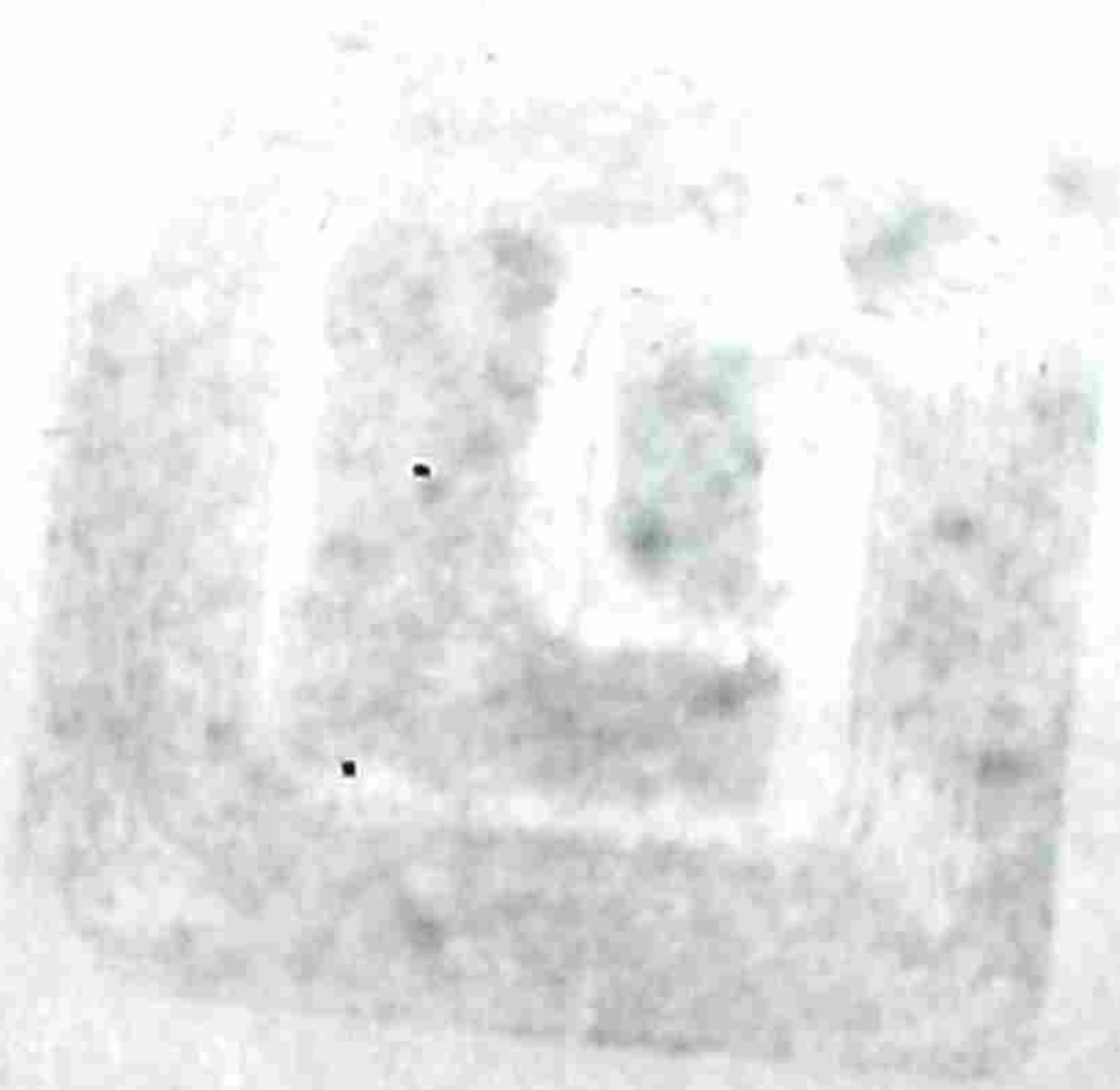
923 DAS

DEDICATED
TO
THE WOMEN OF INDIA

*' A good deal of talent is lost in the world for the want of
a little courage.'*

S. Smith.







**Kumari Shoilabala Das, ex M.P.
at the age of Eighty**

FOREWORD

Raj Bhavan, Bombay,
20th April 1956.

Shrimati Shoila Bala Das' life is inextricably connected with the growth of Orissa in the course of the last 60 years or so. When I look back in my own imagination to the days when Shri Madhu Sudan Das chose to settle down in Orissa and work for her uplift, I quite clearly visualise the enormous difficulties which he must have undergone to bring up a Province which was, for no fault of hers, utterly neglected by the then British Government. It was open to Shri M. S. Das to have chosen to settle down in Calcutta where he had the opportunity to rise to his full stature, but he chose to work in Orissa because of the sympathy for his kith and kin which was in his blood.

Shrimati Shoila Bala Das was not only the daughter of Shri M. S. Das but was also his virtual Secretary in all his undertakings. In that way, the life of Shrimati Shoila Bala Das is intimately connected with all the activities of Shri M. S. Das. In matters of education, social reforms and of political awakening, Shrimati Shoila Bala Das worked directly under Shri M. S. Das for over half a century. Whatever we see today in Orissa owes its origin to Shri M. S. Das' conception and Shrimati S. B. Das' hand in operation. In the field of women's education in Orissa, particularly, Shrimati Shoila Bala Das' name will go down in history as the pioneer. Today she is an octogenarian but her energy surpasses that of many youths.

She has now written her Autobiography which, I am sure, will throw a flood of light on that period about which we have no written record so far. How one wishes that Shri M. S. Das had written his Memoirs for the benefit of the coming generations. From the point of view of the study of the current history of Orissa, Shrimati S. B. Das' Autobiography will indirectly throw light on the conditions prevailing throughout India in those days when the country was completely in the grip of foreign rule without any hope whatsoever of recovery. I congratulate her on her contribution and convey, in this short Foreword, my gratefulness and that of my generation to her for what she has done for Orissa in this long period of about half a century. I trust her Autobiography will be popular reading and helpful to students of history.

Sd. H. Mahatab,
Governor of Bombay.

INTRODUCTION

I have great pleasure in writing few lines as a Foreword to a small book that has been written by Miss Shoila Bala Das.

I have known Miss Das for more than half a century to be precise from 1897 when I joined my service as an Assistant Magistrate and Collector at Cuttack. While in Cuttack my wife and I came in close contact with Miss Das and a great personality in her father Mr. M. S. Das—the Great Madhusudan who may verily be described as the maker of Orissa. A close friendship sprung up between my wife and Miss Das—a friendship that continued unabated till my wife died many years later.

Ever since 1897 I watched the career of Miss Das and my wife and I often felt great delight in observing that Miss Das in all her doings and activities followed the high principles of her illustrious father. Miss Das's activities were not confined to one or two matters only. They were widespread and covered many spheres of life, as will be amply borne out by the events narrated in this little book.

Miss Das has been instrumental in securing for the members of her sex a number of rights and privileges that had till then been all denied to them and for this she had to fight many a tough battle with the authorities. Miss Das had indeed been a born fighter, but if a fighter, she has, like her father, always fought for the weak, for people who have been in trouble and distress and fought for justice against injustice.

Some of the reminiscences of her life as have been mentioned in this little book will be found highly interesting and the reader will, I am sure, get from them not only great pleasure but high enjoyments as well.

S. C. MULLICK.

Ex. Judge, Calcutta High Court.

None can correctly appraise the work and worth of Madhusudan Das unless he takes into account the training he imparted to Miss S. B. Das, which enabled her to distinguish herself in various spheres of public activities. Miss Shoila Bala Das is a daughter of Madhusudan Das's life long friend late Sri Ambica Charan Hazra. She was born at Madhusudan Das's house in Calcutta and he wished to make her his own child being childless and trained and educated her. After her mother's death he took her and gave her his own name and she was known to the public as Madhusudan Das's daughter, with the result that she has been a very prominent figure in Bihar and Orissa in advancing the cause of Indian Women.

While Miss Das was in England in 1907 it was decided by her guardian that she would be presented at the Court of Their Majesties-King Edward and Queen Alexandra. As she did not wish to appear before Their Majesties in English costume, a great commotion was thus produced by her stubborn attitude, as the Sari was not regarded till then as a recognised Court dress. She was asked to follow the prescribed court formalities and etiquette, but she would not agree and she insisted that in paying her homage to Their Majesties she would adopt not only her country's costume, but also the Indian mode of salutation. At last the permission was given to her and she was presented.

Miss Das has worked all her life for the uplift of Indian Women and among her many valuable services may be recalled her securing for them the right to practise in the Indian Law Courts, by having the Indian Legal Practitioners' Act amended. It was through her and her sister's persistent efforts that Government brought in an amending Bill, so that the women in India will have the right to practice in Courts of Law.

She was for years a Fellow of the Patna University and was also elected to the Syndicate, in which capacity she acquitted herself creditably. In 1924 she was nominated a member of the Utkal University. It fell to my lot, as the Law member of the then Provincial Government, to appoint her as an Honorary Magistrate, and she was the first woman in India to hold that office in Patna for years with great distinction.

Her works in the Education field in Orissa are well known. She was the pioneer in the Womens' higher education in Orissa and all her movements are unique and will find a prominent place in the history of the emancipation of Indian Women.

SATCHIDANNANDA SINHA,
Vice-Chancellor,
Patna University.

I deem it a privilege to be asked to write a preface to the memoirs of Miss Shoilabala Das. I met Miss Das years ago, when the All-India Women's Conference met in Patna for its third annual session in 1928. Since then we had met at other conferences. Then there was a lapse of over twenty years when we did not meet at all. In May 1952, we met again in the political arena, now as colleagues in the new Council of States. Living almost next door to each other in the Western Court, we walked in and out of each other's company and shared our thoughts without reserve.

What impressed me most in, and evoked my admiration of, Miss Das is her utter honesty and forthrightness. It is not in her nature to mince matters or beat about the bush. She would call a spade a spade, and the book is full of such incidents which show up the consequences of her behaviour when faced with arrogance or injustice. We may doubt the helpfulness of such a behaviour but we cannot deny that it has its advantages with honest people. And in the last analysis, Miss Das's methods have not failed. Her various activities throughout her long life of public work bear testimony to it.

In Delhi Miss Das took full advantage of her age and experience. Commanded ministers and deputy ministers about as if they were her own children. She was universally loved and respected as the "Grannie of the House." Her sense of duty, her constant concern for the welfare of women and children, her desire to get all possible help from the Centre for Orissa made her almost the only spokesman from Orissa in the Council of States from the Government Benches. If she found the Council debates repetitious and dull, meaningless and wasteful, she also found in Delhi opportunities for acquainting the ministries with the problems of

Orissa. More than that, any person in distress found in her a sympathetic listener; and indeed no pains were spared to help the needy or bring justice to the oppressed. I am sure that she will be missed by the many whose cause against injustice she upheld; but gratitude will brighten the evening of her life.

What is said above refers only to the last two years of her life in Delhi. Her work in Orissa continues; and will continue as her vitality is undiminished. She still has the joy of living; age certainly has not withered her. Miss Das is a rare personality. She has tremendous enthusiasm for doing things; her spirit of adventure, worthy of emulation, will put many younger people to shame. She is buoyant and every difficulty is a challenge to her and she meets it like a seasoned fighter. Today her chief concern is to make the life of women in India better than what it has been hitherto. She feels concerned about their general backwardness because she believes, as many of us do, that unless they are educated and given opportunities to participate in national life in a larger measure, the pace of progress will be slow. This of course is an undeniable fact.

Miss Das's love of work, innate sense of justice, courage and persistence in getting things done are qualities which women should learn from her. They are the qualities of pioneer women all over the world and as a young country we need them in a large measure to insure our freedom. In conclusion I wish Miss Das long life and physical strength to carry out her various projects for the welfare of women and children in Orissa and success in her endeavours to raise the status of Indian women and the prestige of our land.

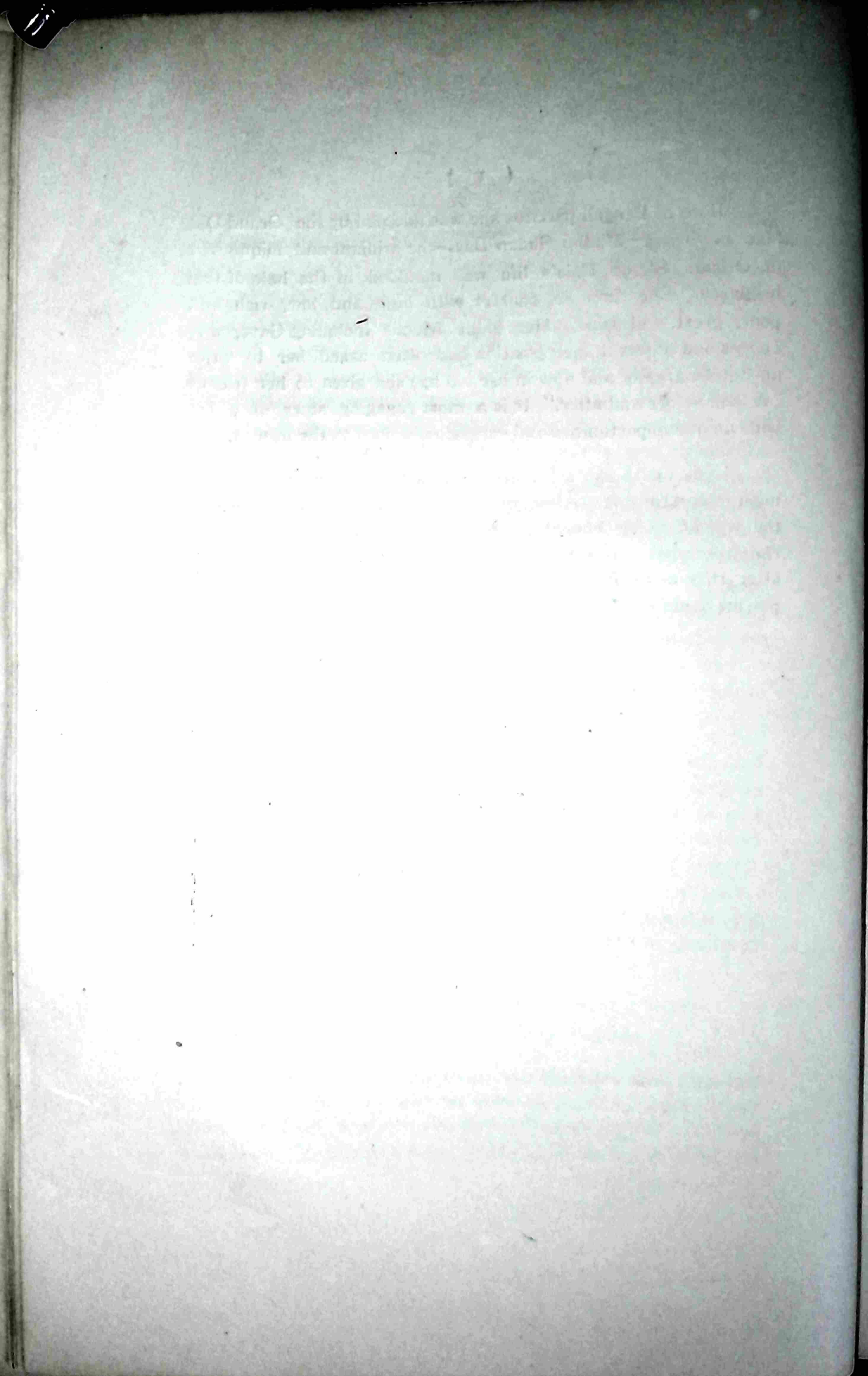
LAKSHMI N. MENON, M. P.
External Affairs.

It is a privilege to be asked to write these few lines introducing to the public a woman of such outstanding personality as Shoila Bala Das. I have known Shoila Bala all my life and have seen her go through her life with unabated energy in many and varied fields.

Born of Bengali parents, she was adopted by the Grand Old Man of Orissa—Madhu Sudan Das—the brilliant and unique son of Orissa. Shoila Bala's life was moulded in the halo of that brilliance. She came in contact with high and low, rich and poor, great and small. Her many friends including Governors, Judges and others in high position had often asked her to write an autobiography and now in her old age she gives to her friends "A look before and after." It is a most engaging story of a life with unique opportunities and experiences, used to the utmost.

Long ago I saw a Picture where a man and woman play the most important role. After some hair raising incidents in which the woman excels herself, the man, with a smile about his lips exclaimed—what a woman. I am sure the readers of this book, after they have finished reading will join with me, with smiles playing about the lips in saying—what a woman.

N. B. SHOME,
Inspectress School (Retd.)



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AUTHOR'S APOLOGY

I hope my readers will excuse the mistakes—printing and otherwise—which have crept into the book inadvertently.

SHOILA BALA

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PART I

CHAPTER I

"I AM BORN"

I AM a great talker. I loved to talk to my friends about some of my reminiscences of the past. I have innumerable friends. Some of my friends have been asking me again and again to put down in black and white some interesting episodes of my life and experiences. So at last, at the age of eighty-two when my eyesight is getting dim, due to cataract, I have asked a dear friend of Calcutta to write as I talk.

I am born in 1875. My birth place is at Chuckerbare Road near Bhawanipore in Calcutta. My parents are convert Christians. My father had my horoscope made. My birth planet is Aries, which is the ruler of my life. It rules the head and gives good mentality, and also a tendency to headaches and nervousness. It also says that the influence of my sun sign endows me with great versatility and vivacity that should make me very popular in social circles. Many changes in my life results from the rapid movement of my ruling planet Mars. I would be always inclined to look forward to a better state of things and would give evidence of great determination, impulsiveness, execution and enthusiasm. I would have a long life and would never be in want. I would be an earnest worker and be successful in my undertakings. I am a born fighter. Reader! From my life you will see how far this horoscope came true.

My father was Sri Ambica Charan Hazra. By embracing Christianity he was deprived of his ancestral rights, though he was the eldest son. My mother, Prasanna Mayee was more or less an invalid. I am the eldest of five children and sisters. We came from a middle class family, still to be found in the Midnapore district. My parents are both dead. Of the three

brothers the two eldest brothers are no more. My sister Shudhanshu Bala Hazra was a District Inspectress and afterwards became the Principal of the Ravenshaw Girls' High School. She is the first lady-lawyer in India and was responsible for having amended the Legal Practitioners Act thereby giving the right to women to practise in Courts of Law. She practised in the Patna High Court for two years. But she is no more. So I am practically alone in my old age, though my youngest brother is still alive and in Calcutta while I am in Cuttack all by myself. However, I sometimes get the companionship of my two friends—The Misses Shome—which I greatly value, and who help me as I write these reminiscences.

CHAPTER II

"I AM THE LEADER OF BOYS"

All my life I have liked boys more than girls, men more than women. It is I feel due to my sun sign. Even as a child I liked the company of boys more than that of girls. Courage, adventure, hardships ever appealed to me. I enjoyed games, liked swimming, running, kite flying and climbing with boys. Once at a dolls wedding I officiated as priest, being dressed up like one. I chanted Mantras of my own making. It was a successful wedding since the parties spent two thousand rupees to ensure its success.

Sometimes the boys refused my company in a daring adventure, being a girl. But in the end they always gave in. My spirit of adventure being superior to their own. While coming back from the Day School, I joined the group of boys, planning the afternoon's adventure. In the adventure of helping ourselves generously from the garden of our neighbours, without their knowlege, fruits or flowers which happened to be in that season. I loved mango season the best. I used to climb up the trees like a squirrel and plucked green fruits throwing them on the heads of my younger friends,

Sometimes, we went swimming in some half a dozen tanks which were in the neighbourhood. I liked moonlight swimming best. The boys taught me various arts of swimming and encouraged me to cross the tank from end to end an easy first. I was never caught, never failed. Many a time my mother scolded me for keeping the company of boys. But I always found boys more full of spirit, undertaking and intelligence than girls. I could not resist the temptation of being with them and sharing their sports. They did nothing without consulting me. Even the bigger boys always considered me their leader and mentor. My childhood days up to the age of ten spent in the company of these dear boys were golden days, almost all of them are no more. I am the only one left with those golden memories.

" 'Tis the last rose of summer
Left blooming alone."

CHAPTER III

" I AM THE LITTLE HOUSE WIFE "

I have already mentioned that my mother was an invalid. My father's circumstances were not such as to allow him to keep a number of servants. My mother was very particular about cleanliness. On no account would she allow us to eat or drink out of any other utensils, but in special kind of refined brass, which must be cleaned till they would shine like gold. Servants would not attend to it well, so I was deputed to see to it, and often I had to do it myself. She was very fastidious about her food too, and I had to cook it often to satisfy her. I learnt cooking from my mother when I was only nine years old. I remember an incident. One day the cook did not turn up. My mother was in bed. I had two brothers. In order to give breakfast to my father at 9 a.m. so that he might go to office, I entered the kitchen and started cooking. In a short time I prepared three vegetable dishes and rice. Then proudly I placed them before my father. While he was eating with

great relish I asked him "Father, how do they taste?" Smilingly he replied, "Very nice, I have never tasted such nice curries." Never before in my nine years did I feel so proud and happy as I felt when I received my father's unstinted praise. But alas; it was shortlived. When I sat down to have my meal with my brothers they refused to touch such awful stuff. When I myself tasted them one after another, I found them so badly cooked, that they were not fit to be eaten. Alas for human praise. How shortlived they are. That day I waited for my father's arrival. When he did arrive I tearfully questioned "Father, how could you eat such awful stuff? Why did you praise me?". He put his hand on my head and said, "Child, it was your first effort. I know the trouble you have taken for me. I did not like to damp your spirit by telling you the truth, when I knew you would discover it in time. But to me it tasted like nectar when cooked by my little daughter out of her great love for me. I prophesy that you will be a splended cook in time." At the age of twelve, when I was at Simla with my parents, and a sister was added to our family, I really became a good cook under my mother's instructions. Daily I learnt to cook a new dish or sweetmeats. So even at the age of eighty-two I love cooking new dishes. I myself love cleanliness. I love to see things in their proper places. From childhood onwards that habit was instilled in me. Things not in their proper places seem to make me unhappy. When I used to come back from the day school (I was compelled to give up the pleasure of roaming with the boys when I was ten years old) my great delight was to bring orderliness out of chaos. My brothers were famous for their untidiness. After that I took pleasure in sitting down mending the clothes of my little brothers. In fact the responsibility of running the household fell on my sholuder. I did not grudge it, but I considered myself the most important person in that little household. My father gave me the bazaar money and I managed things as nicely and economically as possible. Since then keeping of accounts has become a second habit with me. It saved me in after-life from utter ruin.

I was also a good nurse, looking after my baby brother and sister. I led them, I fed them, I mothered them and I put them to bed. When ill, I nursed them. To discipline them was my duty, to love them was my pleasure. Even when they were quite old they got into the habit of consulting me and asking my help in their difficulties, and I got into the habit of seeing them out of their difficulties.

This home education fitted me well for after life. In various circumstances it helped me to stand on my feet. Here I first learnt how to save a penny by opening a Savings Bank account. I got five whole silver new rupees from my father on my twelveth birthday. Possessing so much money I felt myself rich. I went on dreaming and scheming about this wealth. At last my better judgement suggested opening of an account book in Post-Office Saving Bank by depositing rupees two. This account book is still in my possession. And the habit developed with age—my wealth accumulated. Since then every month half of my pocket money went to the Bank. Thus in future I became rich !!

CHAPTER IV

"I AM BEING INTRODUCED TO M. S. DAS"

Mr. Madhu Sudan Das and my father both studied in the L. M. S. College, Bhowanipore. They were in to the same hostel and shared the same room. Consequently they became firm friends. This lasted till their death. They embraced Christianity on the same day and in the same Church. Consequently their friendship was cemented on religious grounds. When my father brought my mother from his village Hindu home she was brought to Mr. Das' house. Mr. Das was married then to a Bengali Christian lady. I was born at Mr. Das' house. Both Mr. Das and his wife took great interest in me. But as my father was in the Government of India service in the Finance Department, the friends were separated. After the death of his wife, Mr. Das left Calcutta and came back to Cuttack, his own native place.

In the year 1888 Mr. Das, after our return from Simla, came to see us. This was my second introduction to him. He at once took a great interest in me. He asked for my mother's permission to adopt me. But my mother would not give her consent. Owing to my mother's ill health he insisted that my father should take leave, come to Cuttack and stay at his house for two months. We came to Cuttack in 1889. I was very interested in his childhood's adventures and got attached to him. Finding that I was a kindred spirit he wanted to educate me. He wanted my parents' consent to send me to a boarding school in Calcutta. They readily gave their consent. From this stage I came to know Mr. Das well. After my mother's death in 1892, he brought us all to Cuttack to stay with him. My father married a second time and stayed in Simla. So we brothers and sisters stayed at Cuttack, which was our home. Mr. M. S. Das brought us all up. After I passed my I.A. Examination I was adopted by him and introduced to the public as his daughter, which enabled me to carry on with greater facility his activities for the welfare of the people of Orissa, especially in the cause of female education generally. I am thankful to God that his choice of a Bengali girl as a daughter was not in vain. Though he was criticised by many of his Oriya friends and relations in thus choosing a Bengali and not an Oriya girl, on his death bed he expressed his satisfaction on having adopted me, for I fulfilled his expectations.

CHAPTER V

"I AM BEING EDUCATED"

I had my elementary education in the London Mission Girl's School, but the foundation was weak, as I had to go to Simla for eight months in the year with my parents. When Mr. Das took up the question of my education he sent me to the Bethune School. I became a boarder and was admitted into the second class. The following year I passed the Entrance Examination. This year my mother died.



Sri Madhusudan Das in 1892

Mr. Das in the following year sent my sister, Shudhanshu to the Bethune School. In the first year I had twelve fellow students. All my college friends are no more. At college I was the leader of all the girls in my class in acts of mischief. But I managed to escape punishment. It was one of the rules of the hostel that after college hours we should show our stockings then worn by us. If any holes were seen, it had to be mended then and there. One Mrs. Biswas, the Superintendent, was very particular on this point. So to thwart her, one day I told the girls that we would have a little fun out of her. I put on a pair of lace stockings. When I came for inspection the old lady who had never before seen a lace stocking complained that my pairs was full of small holes ; I was asked to fill them all up. I refused to comply with her request. I was reported to the Principal. I was called and reprimanded. So I held up my stockinged foot. The Principal, an august being, feared by all, looked at it, smiled and dismissed the case.

I being a Christian girl, the Lady Principal, also a Christian, took me to task for mixing with Brahma Girls on Sundays in the hostel. I did not pay attention to her orders, as I felt the injustice of it. On Sundays I freely mixed with my Brahma friends. Seeing this the Principal again took me to task. I told her that I did not see the justice of it, as I found there were things which I could learn from them. She was struck by my daring but could do nothing to cure me.

I came back to Cuttack as I was ill. After my illness I did not care to go back to the College so I was put into the Loreto Convent, Middleton street in Calcutta. Here I learnt many things from the good Sisters. They were very loving and kind to me. They never tried to convert me to their religious tenets. At night when the Reverend Mother used to bless the girls with " God bless you my child, sleep well " I also knelt down to receive her blessings and felt at peace with the whole world. But I should like to record an incident here which made a deep impression on my mind. The time of University Examination drew near. It was the rule of the

Convent then that each examinee should pay rupees ten towards the lighting of a candle and offering of prayers by a religious man for her success. I refused to do it on any account, as I could not believe that my success in examination depended on the intervention of another. I argued thus "Had it been true, I would not have taken so much trouble in preparing for the examination" I was willing to give even Rs. 20/- towards the feeding of the poor girls, but not even one to make me pass my examination through the the prayer of another. When I asked for my roll No. which was kept in the Church under the carpet, where the Father stood daily to offer Mass, it was returned to me in great distress. Everyone believed that I would be unsuccessful through this obstinacy. At the examination hall, I found to my dismay that questions that I had learnt so well had clean gone out of my memory, and I failed ignominiously. It left a deep impression on my mind and I left the Convent as I had no desire to court a second failure.

As my father wanted me to pass the I.A. I was sent to the Deveton College at Free School Street, Calcutta. I stayed in the hostel of Young Women's Institution at Park St. There were many European girls in the hostel but only two attended the college with me. Most of the college boys were Europeans, except half a dozen Indian boys. Amongst the boys one was from Bihar, a Mohammendan named Khaja Mohammad Noor. He was my fellow student in the college and I never expected to meet him in after life. He helped me considerably when I met him in Patna as Vice-Chancellor of the University and the President of the Legislative Assembly.

I enjoyed my life at Deveton with the girls and was quite free to go about as I liked. I passed my I.A. After the results were out Mr. Das wanted me to join either the Deveton or the Convent for the B.A. But I did not care to go to any of these colleges. This time Mr. Das was ill and the doctors advised him to go to England. I made up my mind to stay at Cuttack in his house during his absence. At first he

refused but in the end he gave in, stipulating that Mr. and Mrs. Anam Chandra Das and their family would stay with me during his absence. To this I readily agreed. Thus I severed my connections with Calcutta, my birthplace, and settled down in Cuttack, my adopted country.
