

Letters to my beloved Shadhona

Birendra (Biru) Kumar Chatterji was born in Allahabad in December 1923 to Professor Khetra Pada Chatterjee and Janhabi Chatterjee. Prof. Chatterjee was Head of the Chemistry Department, Allahabad University, and the Chatterjees were one of Allahabad's leading *probasi* Bengali families.



**Birendra Kumar
Chatterji**

Biru graduated from Allahabad University with Honours in Economics, topping his University class. He joined the Imperial Bank of India (later State Bank of India), and went on to become Chairman and Managing Director, State Bank of Saurashtra, and Chairman and Managing Director, State Bank of Bikaner and Jaipur. His final job was Chairman and Managing Director, UCO Bank, from where he retired in 1984. He passed away in August 1989, leaving behind his wife Shadhona, a son, a daughter and grandchildren.

Ed. note: These letters written by Birendra Kumar Chatterji to Shadhona Bannerjee, in 1947 and 1948, when they were engaged but before they got married in June 1948. He had met Shadhona through her father, Hari Prasad Bannerjee, who was a senior office of the Imperial Bank of India. These letters were provided by the Chatterji family after the death of Shadhona Chatterji in 2015.

Undated. Probably December 1947.

Written from Calcutta to Shadhona in Delhi.



I have a photograph of yours which I took from Mother when I went home last time (*to Allahabad*). That photograph is my only source of consolation. The idea that I would have to face two days of no work, the 24th and 25th, was such a nightmare for me that I wanted to run away to some place where I could keep myself busy. I wanted to go to some different atmosphere though – to a place where I could see love and affection being preached and practiced – and forget the sordid life of the Bank. Shantiniketan was having its annual convocation on the 24th and I thought of going there.

.....

I am back from the place just now. What I saw there is something I will not forget. But wherever I went, you were always with me. I can honestly say that yesterday right from early morning till the time I came back to Calcutta, tender thoughts about you did not leave me for

a moment. As I saw the boys and girls play and talk and eat together, your thought clung to my mind and made me feel that you too were with me, even if it was for a short while, sitting and talking to me. The night with a bright half moon and broad stretches of grass with clusters of men and women here and there was more than ever depressing for me. I was with a small group myself but really far far away from it. It seemed as if I was walking with you on the grass and admiring with you the rustic community dances of the Santhals. The Santhals do dance well. The women dance in very slow rhythm and look perfectly dignified. The men, there being not more than a couple of them, play the *dhol* that sounds so weirdly sweet from a distance that you begin to feel restless. The sound of the *dhol* when it comes across small hills is the best. Here there were no hills but the sound nonetheless did make me feel restless.

I saw Uttarayan, Shyamoli, and the other places of residence of Tagore. Then there was an art exhibition at Kalabhavan and I think I wanted you there the most. I know that you like to paint. It is no ordinary fortune to see the old paintings of Abani Tagore, Nandalal Bose and Asit Haldar in original. Then there were the carvings and etchings of Ramkinker Baij. I don't know if you have heard of him; he is a professor at Kalabhavan. Outside the guest house, a small fair was being held. There were many things for sale, mostly made by the students of Shantiniketan, and I could not help buying a small ivory necklace and broach for you. They are not very good to look at, nor are they made by the local students, but they were the best things I could get for you. As I wanted to take something for you from this wonderful place, I could not resist the temptation of buying them. Please don't mind if I send them with your sari in a day or two.

Last night's journey was rather troublesome. The train was due at 11 'o' clock in the night but it came near about 1.30. As most of the people were going by this train, the rush was terrific. I could hardly get any space to sit. But even in this rush, I felt I was without something and my mind would again and again go to thoughts about you. I wished fervently that you were with me in this trip liking and appreciating things of art.

People say I am lucky and I feel that way too. Mashima (*Shadhona's mother*) wrote in her last letter that she was enclosing a photo of yours. I think she forgot to enclose it, as I did not find any. Do you mind sending it to me this time. You know what it would mean to me.

But just now I can do nothing ~~but~~ ^{except} keep myself
in restraint. I have a photograph of yours which
I took from ~~my~~ Mother when I went home last
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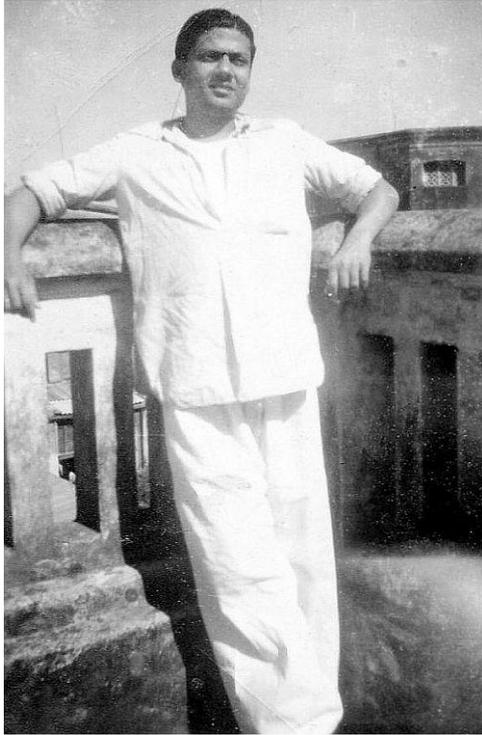
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Thoughts about you I wished fervently that you were with me in this trip liking and appreciating things of art.



25B Townshend Road
Bhowanipur
Calcutta
22nd Jan 1948

Shadhona,



You do not know how overjoyed I felt when I received your letter (*from Delhi*). I knew I would get it. Every day of expectation that passed by made me feel more and more convinced that you would not deny me the opportunity of writing to you.

Choton (*Birendra's younger brother*) received your letter alright and I think sent a reply too within a few days. Something is so terribly wrong with the post now-a-days that you can almost be sure of losing a letter or two now and then.

Yes I know that your Mejomama (*Shadhona's middle uncle*) and Labumashi (*Shadhona's aunt*) are to go to Delhi next week. I do not know if I should ask them to carry your birthday present for me. I go to Raja Basanta Rai Road (*where Shadhona's uncle and aunt lived in Calcutta*) often now. I don't know what they think about me but I really cannot help it, as theirs is the only place where I can get news of you. The last three weeks or so when I hardly heard from any of you, I literally used to hanker for news and went there practically every alternate day.

Gandhiji's sudden announcement that he had decided to fast unto death disturbed our minds extremely. I personally have come to love and revere him. He has been perhaps the only man in the past century or so who has consistently stood up to threat and bullying – things to which no man should submit whatever the consequences. But he is not realizing that the stage has come when we should not yield even one inch to the Muslim separatists (*those seeking the creation of Pakistan*). A temporary artificial condition of peace will not change the course of history. It will only put the generations to come to an immense disadvantage. I don't know when he will realize this. The conditions on which he has broken his fast are really too generous.

Today is Netaji's birthday. Calcutta is in a very gay mood since the morning. The roads are packed with colourful processions. Just now as I am writing to you – it is noon – three planes

are dipping salutes to the memory of Netaji and conch shells from every home are announcing to the world the time of his birth. A procession led by Shah Nawaz and others will start from Netaji Bhawan in the afternoon and terminate near the Victoria Memorial.

Did you go to Agra during the Christmas holidays? You have mentioned nothing in your letter.

Yours affly,

Biru

25 13, Townshend Road,
Bhowanipore,
Calcutta,
22nd Jan. 1948.

Shadhona,

You do not know how overjoyed I felt when I received your letter. I knew I would get it, rather, that I would not be prevented from getting it and that it was only a question of days when I would hear from you. Every day of expectation that passed by made me feel more and more convinced that you would not deny me the opportunity of writing to you. My conviction has at last come true. I want your pardon for being the cause of anxious moments to your parents. I am writing to Mashumia separately, of course.

Choton received your letter alright and I think sent a reply too within a few days. Something is so terribly wrong with the post now-a-days that you can almost be

sure of losing a letter or two now and then. I'll let you know definitely in my next letter if he has sent you a reply - he is not in just now.

Yes I know your Mejomama and Labumashi are to go to Delhi next week. I do not know if I should ask them to carry your birthday present for me. I go to Raja Basanti Rai Road often now. I don't know what they think about me but I really cannot help it as theirs is the only place where I can get news of you all. The last three weeks or so when I hardly heard from any of you I literally used to wander for news and went there practically every alternate day.

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A procession led by Shale Nawaz and others will
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terminate near the Victoria Memorial.

Did you go to Agra during the Christmas
holidays? You have mentioned nothing in your letter.
Please let me know something about it.

Ashish has written to me from Patna. He has been
chosen to represent his school in sports.

I hope you are well and so are Mashima,
Mashomohay, Bunu, Chotto and Thunu. With greetings
to Mashima and Mashomohay and love to you all yours affly.
Benu



25B Townshend Road
Bhowanipur
Calcutta
1st Feb. 1948

Shadhona,

I am sure that you have not (yet) received my letter that I wrote to you on the 28th. I think I posted it on the 30th. Since then the news of the death of Gandhiji has so shocked me that I am in no mood to do anything. We did not have any office yesterday. I heard the running commentary on his funeral procession at Basanta Rai Road (*where Shadhona's uncle etc. lived in Calcutta*). As far as I could gather, the procession must have made a very moving scene. Nobody knows what is in store for us now.

I hope you did not miss joining the procession. Please let me know all the details about it.

I hope Mashima (*Shadhona's mother*) and Meshomoshay (*Shadhona's father*) are well. With pronams to them and love to you and Bunu (*Shadhona's first younger sister*) Chottu (*Shadhona's second younger sister*) and Jhunu (*Shadhona's youngest sister*).

Yours
Biru

Calcutta
1st Feb. 1948

Shadhona,

I am sure you have not received my letter that I wrote to you on the 28th. I think I posted it on the 30th. I had promised that I would write to you and Mashima today. Since then the news of the death of Gandhiji has so shocked me that I am in no mood to do anything. We did not have any office yesterday. I heard the running commentary on his funeral procession at Basanta Rai Road. As far as I could gather the procession must have made a very moving scene. Nobody knows what is in store for us now.

I hope you did not miss joining the procession. Please let me know all the details about it. Your pronams must have reached Delhi by now. We want to reach him to the station.

I hope Mashima and Meshomoshay are well. With pronams to them and love to you and Bunu Chottu and Jhunu. Yours,



Shadhona,

We have just come back from the 13th day ceremony (*for Gandhiji*) at Barrackpore. It is quarter to five at the moment and we left our house in the morning. The rush was, to say the least, terrific and the assemblage went into four or five lakhs easily – this, when Barrackpore is nearly twenty miles away from Calcutta and the only means of transport is the bus. I did not have any idea that there were so many buses plying in Calcutta for the road was literally full of them. At times the jam was so great, specially on our return journey, that we could not move for hours.

The place that the authorities had chosen for the immersion of the ashes is a nice one. The river here is broad and quiet running through what seemed to me an endless field.

Arrangements made by the police were not bad on the whole. Vehicular traffic which included the bicycle was not allowed to proceed beyond a certain point so that all of us had to walk a long distance to come to the river frontage. It was a pleasant spectacle to see many men and women walk barefeet perhaps for the first time in their lives. I remember having seen a few who limped so markedly that, had it not been for their utterly sincere feelings for Gandhiji, they would have, it looked as if, much preferred to be lifted back to their conveyances than go an inch further. Some drank water every ten minutes though the day was on the whole cloudy. An institution by the name of Kashi Vishwanath Seva Dal was arranging for the free distribution of water.

But there were a few quite serious accidents too. I saw a lady faint before me just when she had managed to lift herself across a drainlike affair and there was no dearth of people. A crowd got round her in no time. Nobody had the sense that fresh air was most necessary for her then.

In our own bus, Gandhiji's influence appeared to be nil. Two passengers, perhaps they were a bit exhausted, all of a sudden took to fighting each other and it was a lady passenger who summed up courage ultimately to separate them. One of them complained that as he had received a blow on his nose by the other person it was difficult for him to keep quiet. An onlooker added humorously that just one blow, even if it was a very hard one, did not matter. It would have been different of course if one was given five or six blows. We all had a good laugh at this – a welcome exception in the awfully melancholy atmosphere that was besetting the place.

Our going was on the whole smooth. Never I think in the history of B.T. Road were there so many vehicles as there were today. The ordinary green bus of Calcutta predominated the scene. But there were other types of vehicles too. Open lorries carrying common people – the labourers working in the factories of Calcutta – formed the best part of this endless traffic. Each such lorry was packed to the full and carried with it a sort of a *kirtan* party that chanted Gandhiji's favourite song *Raghupati Raghava* as the lorry moved on. The look of sincerity on the faces of these labourers gave me a feeling that there was still a lot of hope for India. It was after all people like these that Gandhiji had loved and placed his faith in, and, it seemed as if, whatever happened they would not let him down. The poor villagers who wanted to pay their last respects to the mortal remains of Gandhiji did not go by buses or lorries to the riverside. They merely walked the distance and the road was lined with men such as these on both sides – strong brown simple men who too it looked as if would never let this man down.

It has become a peculiar thing with me that whenever I see a thing I like or appreciate, my thoughts run to you and I have a desire to show it to you. In this case too, right from the time I was going, I had this desire.

At twelve noon, the sirens told us to stand still for one minute when the actual immersion was taking place and aeroplanes were dipping their last salutes to all that was left of Gandhiji. It was a touching scene – one I would have been lucky if I had not seen in my lifetime.

Then came the return journey accompanied with dust and waiting. Every time a car or lorry passed by we had nothing but dust all around us and each time we managed to move we created a dust storm ourselves. It took us over two hours to move a few hundred yards with a lot of irritated co-passengers about us. At times the jam was for such a long time that people got down in search of tea and water. After Barnagar, the road was more or less clear and we reached home in half an hour's time.

I think I have written more than I should have today. Your very nice letter to Choton (*Birendra's younger brother living with him at that time in Calcutta*) arrived here yesterday. I could not resist the temptation of reading it. Mashima (*Shadhona's mother*) is feeling worried again, it seems, on account of cholera in the city. I can hardly express how flattered I feel when I think that in addition to my mother there is somebody else who is constantly thinking about our (*Birendra's and his younger brother's*) welfare. Enquiring like her if we have taken cholera vaccinations or not. There is actually no need to take them just now for we are not taking any food from outside. Nevertheless, we have decided to follow her wishes. I am writing to her separately, of course, this Sunday.

There is a little request I have to make to you. Can you make your letters to me a little longer? I have already told you what they mean to me.

With *pronams* to Mashima and Meshomoshay (*Shadhona's father*) and love to you and Bunu (*Shadhona's first younger sister*) Chottu (*Shadhona's second younger sister*) and Jhunu (*Shadhona's youngest sister*).

Yours

Biru

12. 2. 48.

Shadhona,

We have come back just now from the 13th day ceremony at Barrackpore. It is quite late at the moment and we left our house in the morning. The rush was, to say the least, terrific and the assemblage went into four or five batches easily - this, when Barrackpore is nearly twenty miles away from Calcutta and the only means of transport is the bus. I did not have any idea that there were so many buses plying in Calcutta for the road was literally full of them. At times the jam was so great, especially on our return journey, that we could not move for hours.

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Then came the coming and accompaniment with dust and waiting. Every time a car or lorry passed by we had nothing but dust all around us and each time we managed to move we created a dust storm ourselves. It took us over two hours to move a few hundred yards with a lot of irritated co. passengers about us. At times the jam was for such a long time that people got down in search of tea and water. After Bar nagar the road was more or less clear and we reached home in half an hour time.

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Yours Benin

24th March 1948

Shadhona dear,

I received your nice letter last evening. But again I had to wait a very long time. I think I cannot describe to you what passes through my mind when I do not hear from you.

Originally I had thought of going to Allahabad (*where Birendra's parents lived*) during these holidays. But now I think it will not be possible as we are not closed on Saturdays. Holidays have become such awful things for me that I have almost begun dreading them. I cannot concentrate on anything. It seems I must do something. We have decided not to play 'holi' this year. If I do not have any programme, I will go to Panihati where my grandparents are staying and spend a little while with them.

Your description about the Nepal House reception is really very nice. I have not seen Lord and Lady Mountbatten myself though they were here the other day. Nehruji during my University days (*in Allahabad*) and earlier used to come to a club of which I was also a member. We used to have discussions often. I do not know if he will be able to recognize me now. I don't think he will. But he did recognize me at Dibrugarh when he went there on an election tour. He asked me why I had come to stay at such a distant place, and when I told him I was serving in the Imperial Bank he immediately lost all interest in me.

Let me stop here otherwise I shall be late for office. Please reply by return post.

With lots of love to you and *pronams* to Mashima (*Shadhona's mother*) and Meshomoshay (*Shadhona's father*) and the choicest wishes for Bunu (*Shadhona's first younger sister*) Chottu (*Shadhona's second younger sister*) and Jhunu (*Shadhona's youngest sister*).

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But all the same I am requesting. With lots of love to you
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