

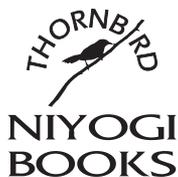
*a plate of* white marble



B A N I B A S U

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Translated from the Bengali original *Swet Patharer Thala*  
by **Nandini Guha**



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Dedicated to the memory of Pishima,  
the late Karunamoyee Mitra.







The house at Number 45 Shyambazar Street had its date of construction engraved right at the top of its facade. From this, it could be learnt that the house was not built in this century. If not hundred, it was close to eighty-five years old. Thanks to the moist winds from the holy Ganges in its close proximity and the salty winds from the Bay of Bengal within 105 kilometres to the south, houses in Kolkata do not survive as long as the rich, traditional manor houses of England do. However, first-class materials from the British companies—marble, pillars, arches, tiles, original Burma-teak windows, doors, rafters and the limestone-layered, twenty-inch-thick brickwork—continued to ostentatiously preserve the antique glory of these homes till today. This carefully polished old heritage, going by the name of ‘aristocracy’, may well be called stiff-necked orthodoxy, with all its evil fallout.

A walk along 40 feet of black- and white-chequered marble would lead you to a black marble stairwell. The corridor would start again, this time on the ground floor, 40 feet in length, chequered black and white, in exactly the same pattern. One had to walk down half its length to find the dining room door. And to walk this whole length in the afternoon could make one tired.

The house was structured like an army barrack, rows of rooms crowding its southern fringe. Not only its first-floor rooms but even those on the ground floor could enjoy the famous southern Kolkata breeze from time to time. To the north was a corridor. The tops of its doors and windows had red-, blue-, green- and yellow-stained glasses. As the sun moved to the north, these played to form multicoloured patterns on the marble floor. The house faced east. The roof top gave an excellent view of the sunrise.

Similar-sized, double-storeyed houses made up the locality spread quite far. In the distance, when the sun rises right between two palmyra trees, even those moss and mildew-covered, flowerpot-laden, decrepit terraces, crisscrossed with multiple wires, lined with clothes are bathed in the bright sunlight. Yet, one can never be sure whether that first ray of a new dawn touches the grounds of the other parts of the locality as well.

The early morning cacophony—the clangour from the local tube well as its handle rose and fell, the clang of utensils being scoured, the swish of brooms and the hoarse voices of housewives issuing orders and instructions—touches such a quarrelsome decibel that neither the Vedic hymns nor the tuneful Rabindrasangeet, in a grave baritone, or soft tenor, can find a way through, sadly beating a hasty retreat.

In the semi-paved, open courtyard on the western side were tile-covered servant quarters. There were also washrooms with big water-storage tubs and an unkempt garden. Some bird must have dropped a half-eaten fruit, who knows when. The cement had broken open there to make room for a guava tree,

evergreen and perennially fruit-bearing. Next to it stood a pair of sacred neem. These too were the result of the gardening skills of birds and their like. The shade of neem is believed to be wholesome. The combined shade of these three trees sheltered the house from the setting sunlight and one had to climb up to the roof for a feel of the afternoon sun. The corridors had long shadows falling over them at this time. Freezing north wind entered through one odd, open, red-blue window pane. Needles of cold dew penetrated the soles. The northerly winds pierced the black woollen shawl, wrapped around her body and chilled her bones.

Even though every room in the house had drapes, typically styled in the fashion of Santiniketan, hanging on the doors, the entrance to the dining room was bare, lest soiled hands spoil them on entries and exits. The men of the house, the ruler class that is, did not have to bother about any restriction. They were reserved for the women and women alone. The mother-in-law used to say that a house's character is determined by the deportment of its womenfolk. Signatures belong to the domain of men and etiquette to that of women. A scratch by a man is capable of producing a bag of money, while the conduct, modesty and practices of the women can make or mar the prestige of a house. And by the way, people have very dirty habits. They may just wipe wet or soiled hands on the drapes—and that throughout the day. It is better, therefore, that the door remains drape-less.

Through this little passage could be seen a dinner table at the extreme right. The eldest son of this house had introduced this system on his return from abroad, amidst strong protests

and exchanges. Next to it was a fridge. This too was not very old, and introduced by the same individual after the same kind of disapproval and opposition, for fear that somehow fresh food would get mixed up with the stale and impure. Initially it was left empty, but for fruits, curd and sweets. Now everything found its way in. The freshly cooked dishes were kept on separate shelves. That was all. Lately, it had become a necessity in summer, for sherbets and cold water. It provided moreover a chance to show off to the visitors, as they were served chilled drinks. Yet it was a privilege closely guarded. In the left-hand corner of this room, a piece of black blanket was laid for a mat. In front of it, on the floor wiped clean, was placed a white marble plate, procured from Kashi-Benaras. Next to it, there was a glass and a bowl, both spotlessly white, made of pure, unblemished marble.

Serving Atap-rice on the plate from a small saucepan, the middle-aged, heavily built mother-in-law suddenly broke into wails. One-fourth of her hair had turned grey. A broad streak of vermilion was visible in the broad parting of her hair. She was in an artistically woven, red-bordered sari, with three rows of the traditional temple pattern. She would wear nothing but these colourfully bordered saris. Her arms were full of loudly jangling gold bangles, wristlets and the special wedding bangles of iron and conch shell. Her wails however outdid their jangles. They must have derived their strength from the quality of her voice and the depths of her grief. 'Where are you gone Khoka! Come and see, come and see my suffering for once. How can I possibly serve this child with such food?'

Two other women were seated there. One was a younger paternal aunt. Promptly, she pressed the edge of her sari to her eyes. The second was an older sister-in-law. She wiped hers and stood up. Very few married women, in fact, can stand for long such a blood-chilling scene, especially when accompanied by the background score of esraj-like wails. The young woman, who had just entered the room for a meal, after the tiring barefoot walk down the long, cold verandas, her toes blotched by the cold, her body in shivers for weakness and unexpected agitation, suddenly spoke up, ‘Why not serve then something that does not pain you Ma, something that I can eat? Why this daily ritual of crying? To tell you the truth, I can’t eat this anymore, I just can’t...’ The last words were distorted as she choked in tears of frustration.

A thunderbolt had suddenly struck the room. The older sister-in-law had already got up to leave. She continued to stand in a state of uncertainty, looking simultaneously at the faces of the mother- and daughter-in-law facing each other. Then, abruptly, she left the room.

The mother-in-law swallowed her ready wails and lowered her face, not to raise it again. The aunt-in-law’s face, her tears drying up, looked bewildered, as though someone had slapped her with an open palm. The prescribed meal of a widow’s broth of boiled rice, potato and green banana—just would not go down Bandana’s throat today. Combined rage, mortification and a sense of disgrace caused the food turn into a coagulated lump in her throat.

The year 1955 had just commenced. It was the end of January. The cold was making itself felt. Even today, seven

to eight years after independence, it was as if winter was still expecting like a sahib the arrival of the gift baskets of orange, apple and plum cakes. In this house, winter this time meant other things—death, loss and grief—a grief the end of which was not visible in the near future. It was almost three or four months since Abhimanyu Bhattacharjee, the eldest son of this family, Bandana's husband, four-year-old Abhiroop's father, the chief designer of Joginder and Joginder, had died of a massive heart attack. He was certainly not of an age to die. Touching forty, the man barely looked more than thirty. At one time, he was also a well-reputed sportsman. He had been a first-division-footballer. However, he was forced to give up the sport when his left kneecap got dislocated. Yet he had kept up his fitness by regular yoga. He followed Muller's freehand exercise chart with clockwork precision, and remained straight, strong, flexible and young. Even moments before his death, he had felt nothing. He had no physical ailments at all. He had gone on a tour to Madhya Pradesh. A new steel plant had been coming up there with Russian collaboration. By early evening he had just reached home from the station. It is a domestic ritual to touch the parents' feet and seek their blessings when they leave or enter the house. He bent over his father's feet, but quickly stood up.

'What happened, my son?' His father had asked.

'No, nothing. I'll just take a shower and return, *Baba*', he had said.

Roop had insisted on being carried in his father's arms right from the doorstep. He hero-worshipped his father. Abhimanyu

had said, 'If you climb onto my lap now, I won't give you the fun-thing I got for you, Roopu.' In anticipation of getting the fun-thing, little Abhiroop held his father's hand and leapt up the stairs all the way to the first floor. As soon as he entered the room, Abhimanyu had told Bandana, 'For the last few days, Bandana, I am having a nagging pain in my chest. Just a bit. For work pressure, I had no time to pay attention. Just get me a Carbo-Veg 30 from the box, will you?'. While lowering the medicine chest from the shelf, Bandana could hear him laughingly tell her, 'The pain is on the left side of my chest, that means the heart, that means it's failing, that means I'm departing for my eternal journey, do you understand?'

'What do you think you are up to?' Bandana was irritated. 'Is everything a joke to you? Have you been eating junk or what?'

'Come on, they sent me to promote their interests. Wasn't I supposed to eat when they pampered me at every meal?'

'So you have gobbled up all that rubbish and ...'

'O Bandana, is it a terrible sin to eat? Arrey baba, what is life all about if not for eating! Now, now, don't be upset, I barely tasted the food.'

'What do you mean?'

'Just as you only touched the sumptuous banquet laid out for you as a new bride.'

'Honestly?'

'Honestly. Just fried fish, mutton and some salad... and still this painful tale of gas and indigestion...'

'Is it still that bad? OK, I'll just put a call through to Dr Sengupta.'

‘Arrey wait, hold on,’ Abhimanyu had said and grabbed her hand. ‘Why all this talk of doctors-vaids at the drop of a hat? If the pain doesn’t go with Carbo-Veg, then I will decide that this is not a tale of gas, but a tale of the heart. Then I will take a Spygellia 6. Have you even heard the name in your life? Then after putting a few drops of Crataegus Mother in hot water...’

While speaking, Abhimanyu had moved towards the bathroom, a fresh, Turkish towel with a green border in one hand and an ironed set of pyjama-panjabi in the other. Everyone but Abhimanyu used *gamchas* here. Wearing pyjamas too was a habit exclusively of Abhimanyu’s, others wore dhotis or lungis. All these habits were partly the result of his foreign experience and partly of Bandana’s insistence. His eyes bore now heavy dark circles, proof of his late insomnia and pain. The clean-shaven face had just a hint of green moss on it and had the unadulterated, innocent smile of victory. Now Bandana just had to shut her eyes for this image to instantly come up.

No sooner than the bathroom door was shut, had come that indescribable scream—‘Bandana-a-a!’ She had been unpacking, piling things up neatly on the side of the bed. Used hankies, vests, undies to go into the wash bucket, shirts, towels, pyjamas, panjabis into the dhobi box. That scream seemed to explode like a shell inside.

‘Bandana-a-a-a!’

He had just about managed to open the door before collapsing on the bathroom floor. His eyes were popping up bigger and bigger each minute. Was it for pain? Fear? Or shock?

‘Koli, Koli, call Sengupta Kaku quickly,’ Bandana had lifted his head on to her lap. The sari cover on her head had slipped off, her hair all dishevelled. One of Abhimanyu’s shirts hung still from her shoulder as she had been debating whether to wash it herself or give it to the dhobi. From all corners came running her sisters-in-law, Koli and Mili, Abhimanyu’s *Kakima* and her own mother-in-law. None of the men were at home. Thank God, her father-in-law had lately become rather irregular in court. The sound of his wooden clogs was heard, approaching fast.

‘Give him a little Coramin first, give him Coramin, ten–fifteen drops. Isn’t there any? Don’t you all keep anything at home? Koli, have you made the phone call? What’s this? Your hands are shaking, give it to me, can’t you women do even a small task?’

‘Hello, Sengupta? Sengupta, this is Kashinath, Kashi. I think my son is having a stroke, a coronary, hurry please, will you?’

The doctor came only to witness the final death throes. The oxygen cylinder reached exactly thirty-five minutes after it was required. By that time everything was over.

Three months had passed since, and the fourth month had commenced. Bandana was still struck dumb by the unbounded fear and the horror of this sudden death. Petrified. Immobile. Once in a while, there were volcanic eruptions. In her sleep sometimes, she let out death-defying screams, gripping the bed sheets in her fists. The picture of her husband’s face distorted by inhuman agony, the wide, fear-filled eyes, his seemingly shocked

and stunned expression at the end kept attacking her intermittently in her sleep. Only once had he been able to speak, that too, in a choked voice. 'Am I dying, Bandana? Am I really dying? ...'

The man was in no way prepared for death. It was, as if, a cruel hand had just wrenched him out from the epicentre of an animated, busy, happy and fulfilling life.

Not just because it was her husband, or even someone exceptionally dear to her, Bandana could view the whole tragedy from a third person's angle and yet, even as a third person, she continued to be lacerated by pain and agony. A tall, broad-shaped, well-built, healthy man. One who always made boisterous fun, and had everyone in splits of laughter, one who could keep up *adda* at all times. His capacity to laugh off every issue had not only made him popular within the family but reached as well his office and factory. Any long faces amongst the labour force, and the management would make a beeline for Bhattacharjee saheb. He was neither in charge of Personnel, nor Public Relations, yet whenever there was a crisis, everyone first placed their faith in Bhattacharjee's charisma. He seemed to be the symbol of a life fulfilled. Ah! When he finally lay dead, his eyes wide open in the darkened face, those eyes seemed to be directed at someone with terribly hurt pride. They seemed to be asking Bandana, 'Am I really dying?' That sight had caused Bandana to utter a heart-rending cry and fall unconscious. In the face of this tragedy, this untimely death of someone who had been ceaselessly devoted to enthusiastically living life to the fullest, even her own intense personal sorrow seemed to fade into insignificance.

She felt the need to do something drastic—to run and jump onto the pyre or from the rooftop, or maybe drown in the River Ganges, pour kerosene over her body and be engulfed in fiery flames—something macabre, horrendous.

Her mother-in-law was slowly closing her son's eyelids with sandalwood paste and basil leaves. His head lay across her lap. His entire face was wet with his mother's tears. The second son was bringing a new Santipuri dhoti. The youngest son, a pleated shawl. Neighbours and friends brought flowers, fragrant incense sticks, puffed rice and hollow-centred coins. In a heavy voice, a cousin initiated the final journey with the traditional chant of 'Bolo Hari'. 'Hari bol,' responded the brothers, their voices gone hoarse, as had that of all the mourners accompanying the hearse to the crematorium. From the men emerged not the name of *Hari*, but the rare sound of masculine wails. The son was being carried out from the same gate through which, a couple of hours ago, he had entered carrying his suitcase. At the other end, others carried the swooning body of his wife, some holding up her head, some her feet, some her torso, and deposited her in the bedroom—cold, white and empty. The skills of the doctor, called in for the son, were put to use for the wife.

The *Shraddh* rituals had to be done. In the presence of the elders, the last rites of the young scion of the family were performed. On the *Shraddh* day, Bandana removed every holy picture from the walls and smashed it on the floor. She had no idea from where she got so much strength and anger. The head of the family had arranged for a *kirtana*. Everyone was

there. When the cycle of the sorrowful tunes frequently caused the lead to swoon with overpowering emotions, the burden of the chorus was taken up with loud cries by the rest. The Shraddh ceremony was going on in the office room. In the drawing room, rituals for peace were going on, on one side, the Bhagvad Gita recital on the other. The voices of the priests were rising and falling in turns. In the Shraddh room, little Abhiroop, barely past his fourth birthday, sat on his *Kaka's* lap. No one was with his ailing mother. They had come running one by one on hearing the crashing sounds of breaking glass. Whichever picture came before her, whether that of Krishna, Kali, Annapurna or Gurudev, was thrown on the ground and smashed. Her mouth frothing, her hands covered with blood, how she found so many pictures close at hand was a matter of wonder. The walls of her room made space for some such pictures in the belief that they brought abounding good health, happiness and prosperity to the household.

She was kept sedated with injections day after day. While she remained in this state of defenceless sleep, every Brahmin in the locality was fed. No one was to be left out. After all, the eldest son of the house, a son like a prince, had passed away. Whatever dishes he had loved must be served to everyone. Let all souls be satisfied. While all guests partook of a variety of fish dishes, this twenty-seven-year old, semi-conscious, half-demented woman, whose marital bangles had been smashed, iron bangle removed, hair parting wiped clean of vermilion, face wan and pale, lay in one corner, wrapped in a white sari—like the body of an abandoned beggar woman.

Day after day, from dawn to dusk, her routine was only to sleep. Sleep, sleep and more sleep. The doctors were doing their utmost to make sure that from no opening, not even the tiniest one, should her grief make an entry. To preserve her health, in the short, hyphenated time between waking and sleeping, she was given a little food to eat, but because of extremely tense nerves, that bit was mostly vomited out. After which, she would somehow drag her weak, dizzy head and shaking, unsteady body to the bed and collapse. Everyone thought that possibly this life too was destined to end. The first grandson of this house was surely heading fast towards complete 'orphanhood'. Only the old Doctor Sengupta shook his head and sighed, 'You are at the peak of youth, Ma. The healthy body of a woman pampered and well cared for. Can that give up so easily?'

Finally, one day, having emerged suddenly from her drugged sleep, Bandana was unable to make out where she was. Before her eyes was a pale blue canvas, on which were painted long black stripes, with one small black ball in the centre. It made no sense in her head...fields should be green! But this is blue. A blue field? What are those streaks? Which game does the ball belong to? To which player? When would the game commence? In her weak head circulated all these inarticulate questions. Then a brown kite, black in Bandana's eyes, suddenly neighed loudly like a young pony and pounced on a small black dot. All at once, Bandana realised that this was a kite and that was a dove. The poor dove had obviously got separated from its companion, and the blue vista before her was not of a field, but of the sky. The lines which looked like stripes were window bars. They were

the bars of her domestic prison, almost as much as they were the actual bars of the window at the south end of the first-floor room of Number 45, Shyambazar Street.

Just then, the black ball started to move. A child's small head covered thickly with spiky hair. He had no father. The mother too appeared as good as dead. In this vast world, little five-year-old Roop was absolutely alone. This room was the same as before, unchanged. But it no more exuded the earlier security and shelter. Roop, with his back dejectedly turned away from this huge deception, stood looking at the sky outside, with no idea of what he was expectantly waiting for. Very thin, his collar bones stuck out. His tender head was covered with a crew cut of jet-black hair. The open window was exactly at Bandana's feet. The sky was locked in its frame. Mountains of clouds were piled one on top of another. The sun was behind the mountain. Arrows of light diffused the whole sky. In the sea of sky was swimming the typically solitary kite. Circling around it was a school of doves, making sharp, whistling sounds.

This was a picture Bandana would possibly remember forever. In the canvas of the open sky, a child's head the size of a pingpong ball. On one side the gigantic and the massive and on the other the tiniest of the tiny. How limitless and unrestricted! How extremely restricted, fragile and so very helpless!

It felt as though there was a tiger clawing at her breast from within. Bandana tripped while trying to get off her bed and realised that she did not have the strength to move in a hurry. Tiptoeing slowly forward, she pulled her son close to her breast, from behind. Roop initially did not realise who it was.

His mother had forcefully covered his eyes. 'Who's this? Aa, let me go! Who?' Little Abhiroop screeched like a kite, his tone irritable. 'I don't like it, I tell you, let go! Why don't you let go!'

Bandana held up his chin and slowly turned him around. The boy had forgotten his mother's touch. In what, after all, consists the charm of a mother's touch? Is it some mystery? No. Just the tinkle of bangles, the mixed aroma of a special powder or hair oil and it is ready to evoke the mummy aura. Seeing Bandana, he stared in surprise. Suddenly his two small soft lips began to quiver with a tide of emotions. Bandana saw them gradually swell up and his eyes slowly brim over. Burying her son's face deep in her breast, Bandana told herself, 'If there is really no God, Roop, I am there for you. If the eternal Father forgets His duty, this weak and broken mother of yours will struggle for you alone.' Roop was sobbing uncontrollably. To his mother, for a second, Abhiroop no more remained just a little kid of five but almost became a walking shadow of his father. A helpless man held in the clutches of an angry Mother Nature, pleading, 'Do not snatch me away yet. The earth is so beautiful. Let me live for a little longer.' Gritting her teeth, Bandana said, 'They will have to finish me first, before they can take you away from me. Just because I have been defeated once, does not mean I will suffer defeat over and over again.'