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# Nishikanto: the Brahmaputra of Inspiration

## Introduction—the Early Years

This day my vital is astir,

My voice yearns to hum,

My heart is under a felicity's charm,

Swings fondly my teenaged bower!

Which flower should I offer,

Which path to follow in today's adventure,

How to tune my veena to produce a musical charm?...

This day will sing my prayer

With songs deeper and more sublime,

This day my ardent desire

Dives into fathomlessness of life.

Wind from the secret grove

Will come to play my flute,

The heavens fill with silence' prime. [1]

On 24 March 1909 a son was born to Bijoyshankar Raichowdhury and Soudamini Devi. Bijoyshankar, who was then sixty-five years of age, resided in the city of Unao (situated in Uttar Pradesh, formerly United Provinces). Some time before the birth of the child, he suffered an attack of diabetic coma and it was only after his recovery did he receive the news of the birth of a son. As was the custom of those ages, the child was born in the house of his maternal uncles in the village of Ujirpur of Barishal district of Bengal. Little did anyone know that the sickly newborn would be hailed as one of the greatest poets of the post-Tagore era. The boy with big and dreamy eyes was named Nishikanto.

Bijoyshankar had nearly lost his eyesight due to diabetes but his profession as a lawyer didn't receive any setback because he possessed an impeccable memory. One of his juniors, named Ramgopal Trivedi, used to read out the books of law to him and that served the purpose.

When Nishikanto was four years of age he lost his mother Soudamini Devi who was suffering from tuberculosis, a dreaded and incurable disease in those days. Soudamini was the second wife of Bijoyshankar whose first wife had died leaving behind three sons (Sachikanto, Sitakanto and Surajkanto) and a daughter (Sahasini). Sachikanto died soon after his marriage, Surajkanto died

of tuberculosis while studying medicines and Suhasini too died early leaving behind three daughters Saroj, Nalini and Parul. Bijoyshankar and Soudamini had two sons (Sudhakanto, who would later become secretary to Rabindranath Tagore and Nishikanto) and a daughter named Ushamoyee. It is said that Soudamini had contracted tuberculosis while nursing Surajkanto, as a result of which, Nishikanto and Ushamoyee were not allowed to go near their mother. Soon after the demise of Soudamini, Bijoyshankar gave up his residence at Unao and came to Bengal. At first Nishikanto and Ushamoyee stayed with their maternal uncles at Ujirpur and afterwards they settled in the village of Shivhati (of Bashirhat district of Bengal) where Bijoyshankar had some ancestral properties. Nishikanto's aunt Birajbashini Devi looked after the motherless children as her own kids. Every morning she would give Nishikanto some coins for distribution among the beggars who went past the house. He would sit on a bench in the verandah and distribute the coins to the poor. Through this act, Birajbashini tried to enable the growth of love and sympathy for the poor in the young boy.

Nishikanto was never bestowed with a robust health. Despite the love and affection he received from the elders of the family, he began to suffer from a number of diseases which included malaria, typhoid, pneumonia, black-fever to name a few. To recover from the weakness that resulted due to the diseases, he was served goat-milk instead of cow-milk (as it is easy to digest). Later, when he grew up, whenever he was scolded for his mischief by Bijoyshankar or Sudhakanto (who would say, "You think like a goat."), Nishikanto would reply: "Well, this is the effect of goat-milk."

When Nishikanto was five years of age, Bijoyshankar, Sudhakanto and his wife Nibha left for Santiniketan—the 'abode of peace'—with Nishikanto and Ushamoyee. On their way they halted at Calcutta. The 'City of Palaces' was quite different from the village of Shivhati and young Nishikanto, who had heard the stories of the Arabian Nights from his sister Bela, tried to identify Calcutta with Baghdad, the city of the Arabian Nights. All the descriptions he had heard about the city from Bela matched with Calcutta, so when he asked Sudhakanto: "Is this the city of Baghdad?" and received the reply: "No, it's Calcutta", his young imaginative mind came to the conclusion that his brother knew nothing. After reaching Santiniketan when he was taken to Rabindranath Tagore, he identified the poet as Harun-ul-rashid, the Caliph of Baghdad, and thought that the Caliph must have come in disguise to inquire about the well-being of his subjects.

Though the scenic beauty of Santiniketan developed the poetic mind of Nishikanto, it did little to improve his health. Compared to the other students of Santiniketan he was weak and could never join them in games and sports as much as he wanted because of his physical weakness. But despite his weakness he had a 'demonic appetite'; since he was given only light food for easy digestion, he would sometimes steal food from the kitchen and whenever he was caught he would hide either under a cot (during the darkness of the night) or under a banyan tree during the day.

With his age grew his never-ending mischief. Once Bijoyshankar narrated the story of Aladin to the children of the family; his brother's daughter Aparna (who would join the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in 1955 to look after the ailing Nishikanto) asked Nishikanto: "Brother, if we rub the lamp in the prayer-room would a genie come out of it?" Nishikanto replied: "Certainly, you bring that lamp quietly and start rubbing it." Aparna brought the lamp and began to rub it but when no genie came out she told Nishikanto: "The genie is not coming." Nishikanto assured her: "How do you expect the genie to come in broad daylight amid so many people? He will certainly come by the evening. Don't stop rubbing." Aparna went on rubbing the lamp till sunset; the more she wept because of the pain in her hands the more Nishikanto laughed. It was only when the members of the family heard her cry and came to her rescue did she stop. However,

Nishikanto wasn't scolded; on the contrary it was Aparna who was scolded because of her stupidity.

There are innumerable stories of how Nishikanto would steal food. However it is essential to note that 'stealing' shouldn't be meant in the general sense—he did it just for the sake of fun. Once he drank milk from a tumbler kept in the kitchen at Santiniketan; since the door was locked from outside he put a branch of a papaya tree in the tumbler and sucked a great quantity of the milk through the window! And on another occasion, he along with Sagarmoy Ghosh [2] had climbed up a coconut tree and pierced several coconuts with the help of a drilling machine and drank its water. When the matter was reported to Tagore he sent the dry coconuts to Jagadish Chandra Bose who, after inspecting them, concluded: "It has been done by some insects with long sting." And once Nishikanto had snapped the shikha [tuft of hair on the crown of the head] of Sanat Thakur, the Head Master of the Primary School as well as its Sanskrit teacher (not of Santiniketan) with a pair of scissors while he was taking his afternoon nap since he had scolded Nishikanto.

If Nishikanto was mischievous then it won't be an exaggeration to claim that he had an "able companion and conspirer" in his brother Sudhakanto. There goes a story that once the two brothers heard that the Santals [tribal men] of Santiniketan had killed a tiger; they hurriedly went to the village of the Santals and after bargaining with them got one of the hind-quarters of the tiger which they brought home and cooked. When this news went around, there was uproar among those who knew them and they tried to dissuade them but in vain. At last Tagore himself had to intervene.

Tagore was often informed about Nishikanto's mischievous antics but he hardly admonished the young boy. The poet had noticed the spark of a genius in his eyes and his poems reflected the prospective traits of a great poet. Nishikanto's early poems (most of which are lost to us) were read and commented by Tagore who also invited him to his mansion Uttarayan whenever a good dish was prepared. He also called Nishikanto lovingly: "The Moon-Poet."

The scenic beauty of Shivhati laid the foundation of Nishikanto's poetic genius. The flowing river Ichhamati, green pastures and farmlands, the profound silence of Nature, the chirping of birds—it was as if Nature had built a dreamland on earth. Nishikanto chose a special place for his creative pursuits—it was a piece of land near a huge Banyan tree around which dead children were buried; the place was hardly visited by anyone and Nishikanto found it to be the ideal place for his verse-composition. He would keep the notebooks in which he wrote his poems under a stone and sometimes he just wandered among Nature to embrace the infinite Beauty and Beatitude. During one such occasion, he had lost the sense of time and it was not until 10 o'clock in the night when his uncle found and brought him back to the house. Bijoyshankar was quite perturbed by his son's activities and one day he asked Nishikanto: "Why do you do such things? What do you want?" The young boy declared: "I want to be an ascetic." The old father replied: "So be it, but not until I'm alive."

Nishikanto was hardly in his teens when his father passed away. With the demise of Bijoyshankar Nishikanto's latent desire to become an ascetic rose in his heart. At that time Sudhakanto had left Santiniketan and migrated to Shiuri to work in an American firm. Nishikanto too had to accompany his brother and was enrolled in Benimadhav Institution. Sudhakanto told his younger brother very clearly that since Bijoyshankar was no longer alive therefore Nishikanto would have to abide by all the instructions of Sudhakanto and be serious towards his studies. As an obedient boy Nishikanto began to go to school where he studied well and made new friends. The Head Master of the school (who was Sudhakanto's friend) and Sudhakanto himself were pleased to see Nishikanto concentrating in his studies but the

disciplined life of the school soon turned out to be a bed of thorns for Nishikanto and he began to feel suffocated within the four walls of the classroom. His heart longed to go out and sit amid Nature and compose poetry. One day he bunked school and began to wander aimlessly till he came to a graveyard where he discovered a broken chamber. The chamber was the heaven he was aspiring for; he stopped going to school and spent his time in the chamber writing verses or roaming around. His wandering habits ignored the changing weather and very soon he was down with black-fever once again. When Sudhakanto was informed about his brother's absence from school, he confronted Nishikanto and demanded an explanation for his not going to school. Nishikanto replied calmly: "Due to daily attacks of fever." Sudhakanto refused to believe him and thought it was just another excuse to evade school. But one day Nishikanto's temperature shot up so much that despite covering his body with a blanket he continued to shiver. No medicine could cure him. Then one day Nishikanto told his elder brother that Bijoyshankar had come to him in a dream and told him to use homeopathy and the name of the medicine he gave was 'arsenic'. At first Sudhakanto dismissed it as a mere dream but when one of his friends had the same dream he couldn't remain unconvinced. 'Arsenic' proved to be a good medicine for black-fever and Nishikanto began to recover.

As soon as Nishikanto recovered, he re-commenced his wandering habits and also began to read biographies of saints and holy men. His *vairagya* was noticeable to all. When his maternal grandmother came to visit him, she thought of a brainwave that would cool down the wandering temperament of her grandson. She decided to get Nishikanto, who was then fifteen years of age, married to a village girl whom she had selected. But Nishikanto refused to marry the girl as he had once seen her sucking a mango sitting on a tree, with the juice rolling down her arm. He had developed an instant disliking for her and he decided to renounce the world and become an ascetic without any further delay. On that very night when everyone was fast asleep, he gathered a warm blanket, some clothes and his notebooks where he had penned his poems and left the house. While on his way he suddenly realized that an ascetic mustn't have any worldly attachments. He returned to his house, took an ordinary blanket instead of the warm one, discarded his clothes, threw his precious notebooks into a well and left for his unknown destination.

Nishikanto walked for several hours at a stretch until hunger and tiredness disallowed him to move a step ahead. Then he noticed a mango tree a branch of which had bent downwards and a goat was trying to have the leaves. He went ahead, tore the leaves that he ate and shared with the goat. He resumed his journey till he came to a village where an old lady fed him with whatever she could, i.e. plain rice and pulses. His hunger-stricken body was satisfied and he was convinced that the Divine provided food to those who sought Him. One day he arrived at the banks of a river where a few shops were located. One of the shopkeepers was delighted to see an ascetic at day-break (it is considered to be extremely auspicious) and fed him to his heart's content.

### **A Mighty Person and Mighty Mother**

During the course of his travels, Nishikanto came to Katwa where he took refuge under a Vaishnava sage in his Ashram. The sage developed an instant liking for the young man and Nishikanto too was impressed by his radiant personality. He told Nishikanto that he could stay in the Ashram as long as he wanted but at the same time he warned him of the physical sufferings his body would be subjected to. Nishikanto's recurring fever got completely cured in the Ashram and out of gratitude he began to do errands for the sage whom he began to look upon as his Guru. The more he got the Guru's company the more attracted he began to get. One day Nishikanto beseeched the sage to give him initiation, but the Guru replied: "No, I can't give you the initiation you seek. Do you know whom I'm seeing behind you? There is Rabindranth

Tagore and there is a Mighty Person and a Mighty Mother. They are your destination. My initiation is not for you.”

Nishikanto pondered who those two Beings could be. Regarding the prediction about Tagore he thought maybe he would have to return to Santiniketan, but no matter how much he thought about the “Mighty Person” and the “Mighty Mother” his mind was left without an answer. Little did he know that he was destined to meet them in Pondicherry nine years later.

The Ashram of the Vaishnava Guru had a beautiful garden in front of it and Nishikanto’s job was to pluck flowers from it at day-break for his Guru. One day when he was in the garden he saw two resplendent personalities standing near the gate. They were of fair complexion, quite tall, their hair reached their shoulders and had drops of sandalwood paste on their foreheads. They looked so beautiful that Nishikanto found it difficult to take his eyes away from them but then he felt that he must inform his Guru about the arrival of the guests. He rushed to his Guru and told him about the guests. When the Guru came to the garden with Nishikanto he saw there was no one in the garden. The resplendent beings had disappeared! Nishikanto tried to convince his Guru that what he had seen was no mirage. The Guru understood who those beings were as he could feel the fragrance of their subtle presence and he embraced Nishikanto and said: “Do you know whom you have seen? They were none other than Lord Chaitanya and Nitai! When I saw you for the very first time I understood that your eyes were rare. You could catch glimpses of the subtle world.” Years later the Mother would remark about Nishikanto: “He has the eyes of a visionary.”

Nishikanto observed during his stay in the Guru’s Ashram that in spite of being an ascetic his Guru wasn’t oblivious of the world. Revolutionaries and activists used to visit the Ashram and discuss with the Guru the condition of the world around. During one such discussion, Nishikanto heard the name of Aurobindo Ghose. He could feel the magnetic pull associated with the utterance of the name yet he hardly knew anything about him though he could recall that as a child he had heard his father and elder brother discussing about him. Nishikanto remembered that his Guru had seen a “Mighty Person” behind him. “Could it be Aurobindo Ghose?” he wondered. One day he asked the Guru: “Today you’ve to tell me whether the personality whom you had seen behind me was Aurobindo Ghose or not.” The Guru replied: “Yes.”

Soon after this revelation a group of sages came to the Ashram and invited the Guru to accompany them to the Himalayas. When the Guru gave his consent Nishikanto expressed his desire to follow him but he was refused. After the Guru left, his absence in the Ashram became unbearable for Nishikanto and after a few days he too left the Ashram for an aimless destination and continued to walk till he reached a railway station. He sat on a bench to rest and was immediately spotted by one of Sudhakanto’s friends. He failed to escape and was brought back to Santiniketan.

At the age of eighteen Nishikanto returned to Santiniketan and joined Kalabhavan. Sudhakanto too had left his job at Shiuri and returned to Santiniketan to work as Tagore’s secretary. Tagore was pleased to see Nishikanto; he could observe an indomitable spirit in his plump body. With his childhood friends Shantidev, Sagarmoy, Ramkinkar, Banbihari, Kankar, Prabhatmohan, Monimohan, Hiren and others he developed a world of bliss; he soon became a favourite of all, including Tagore who had marked the presence of a profound sensitivity in his poetry. When Nishikanto was a young boy of eight or nine Tagore had read a manuscript of his and had instructed Sudhakanto not to prevent him from writing poetry and had added that his imagery didn’t come from the apparent life. In Nishikanto’s earlier works Tagore had foreseen the arrival of a poet with a bright future and that’s why despite his thousand and one mischievous activities Tagore never scolded him. As he grew up Nishikanto’s poetry too became varied and forceful.

He began to experiment with his poetry and while he did so Tagore kept a careful eye on him and disallowed the publication of Nishikanto's poems without his prior approval.

One of the greatest milestones of Nishikanto's pre-Pondicherry creations was the composition of *Tukri*. He had composed small poems in blank verse which were based on the day-to-day happenings around us. Those poems were revised, corrected and modified by Tagore himself and had appeared in the magazine *Vichitra*. *Tukri* was an experiment—a successful one—in which Nishikanto broke the limitations of rhythm and metre and gave more stress on expression. Dhiraj Banerjee observes: “These were probably the only kind of verses with which Tagore had been familiar so far as [Nishikanto] was concerned. They were not quite connected one with another. Nor were they of a mystic genre like his later works. They owe much to a simplicity of thought and expression, they deal with human experience in life and have mundane themes. As such the poems themselves were also ordinary and direct; but beautifully written, and at the same time remarkable for their simplicity. Even so it must be noted that the real form of Nishikanto's spirit wasn't there, his poetic eye had not yet opened then.” [3]

In fact this poetic experiment of Nishikanto also inspired Tagore to conduct experiments with his poetry and very soon he created a new genre of poetry which was published in his book *Punashchya* [Post Script]. Years later in 1940 Tagore wrote to Buddhadev Basu that he was repentant for mercilessly correcting Nishikanto's *Tukri* and added that it should be preserved in its best, i.e. original form. [4]

If Rabindranath had seen the prospects of a powerful poet in Nishikanto so did Abanindranath Tagore the signs of an artist in him. Abanindranath and Nishikanto met each other on the banks of the river Kopai where the former had seen Nishikanto looking for something. When he asked whether he was searching for jewels, Nishikanto replied: “I'm looking for ingredients of *Khichuri* [a preparation of rice and pulses].” “Let me see what you've gathered,” Abanindranath inquired and Nishikanto showed him various pebbles which resembled the ingredients. Abanindranath was very pleased to observe Nishikanto's imaginative mind and began to call him the “Mad Artist.”

Nishikanto's paintings can be divided into two parts—landscape and symbolic. Even when he was a student of Kalabhavan where he learned the art of painting from Nandalal Bose and received guidance for the same from Abanindranath, there was a distinct mark of symbolism in his paintings. Once on the occasion of Rabindranath's birthday celebrations, an exhibition of the paintings made by the students of Kalabhavan was arranged. Among the other paintings there was one which was made by Nishikanto and it had a unique style and message. The painting was a symbolic representation of an expression in seven forms and was titled *The Seven Suns*; a dark-complexioned Titan was seen with a knife in his hand moving towards the Sun to assassinate it but the radiant rays of the Sun transformed the Titan into a ray of resplendent light. It denoted the eradication of darkness by the Light which in turn transformed life. Abanindranath was so pleased to see Nishikanto's concept and his work that he instructed others not to teach him the style of painting that prevailed in Santiniketan and allow him to paint what he wanted.

Once Nishikanto and Bonbihari had gone to Ranchi to make some paintings of the scenery around. After they returned they showed their creations to Abanindranath and his elder brother Gaganendranath; both of them were extremely pleased with their work and Abanindranath wrote to Nandalal Bose asking him not to exhibit the paintings with that of the other pupils but to organize a separate exhibition where these paintings would be exclusively displayed.

Nishikanto had observed while playing with colours that every colour had a message. He who has heard the message can easily understand the philosophy of colour combination; with the

silent mind if one gazes at a colour then the message could be heard and its force, according to Nishikanto, was far more superior than the vocal expression. At a later age, he admitted that whatever he couldn't convey through his poems found expression through his paintings.

Sometimes Rabindranath would inquire about the progress Nishikanto was making in his studies. One day he asked Nishikanto: "Is it true that nowadays you're sunk in the writings of Sri Aurobindo?" Nishikanto replied that Sri Aurobindo's works were read not only by him but by many in Santiniketan and he added that books on Ramakrishna, Vivekananda and other saints have been read by him. Years later Tagore admitted that when he had heard of Nishikanto reading Sri Aurobindo's works he had realized that Nishikanto would go out of his hands.

It is essential to note that Tagore wasn't Sri Aurobindo's critic. Years ago when Sri Aurobindo was imprisoned Tagore had written a laudatory poem on him: "Aurobindo, accept the salutation of Rabindranath." In 1928 when Tagore had visited Pondicherry and met Sri Aurobindo, he had noted his experiences in the following words:

At the very sight I could realize that he [Sri Aurobindo] had been seeking for the soul and had gained it, and, through this long process of realisation, had accumulated within him a silent power of inspiration. His face was radiant with an inner light and his serene presence made it evident to me that his soul was not crippled or cramped to the measure of some tyrannical doctrine which takes delight in inflicting wounds upon life.

I felt the utterance of the ancient Hindu Rishi spoke from him of that equanimity which gives the human soul its freedom of entrance into the All. I said to him: "You have the Word and we are waiting to accept it from you. India will speak through your voice to the world: Harken to me..."

Years ago I saw Aurobindo in the atmosphere of his earlier heroic youth and I sang to him: "Aurobindo, accept the salutation of Rabindranath." Today I saw him in a deeper atmosphere of reticent richness of wisdom and again sang to him in silence: "Aurobindo, accept the salutation of Rabindranath." [5]

But at the same time Tagore knew that it wouldn't be possible to suppress the rebel in Nishikanto, who was inclined to break all traditional disciplines, from getting attracted to Sri Aurobindo's writings.

Though he had heard of Sri Aurobindo as a child, it was through his friend Bonbihari that Nishikanto read for the first time Sri Aurobindo's works published in the *Arya*. Very soon Nishikanto realized that Sri Aurobindo was the spiritual guide he was looking for and began to make up his mind of leaving Santiniketan for Pondicherry. Though the people of Santiniketan loved Nishikanto and his poetry but no praise or appreciation could bind him to the place. His aspiration for a higher spiritual life made him leave Santiniketan. Before his departure he distributed his paintings among his friends and burnt all of his poems. It was in the year 1933, Nishikanto was then twenty-four years of age. He went to stay with his friends Tarakumar, Mohitkumar and Bonbihari at Bali from where he went to his ancestral house at Shivhati to meet his aunt and offer his final obeisance to her. After spending a week at Shivhati he returned to Bali where he stayed for four months. Those four months formed the foundation of his future life. For a few days he worked as an art teacher in a local school and also made a few paintings, the notable among those was Gandhari's Awakening (it was based on the early life of Gandhari and Dhritarastra). He took his paintings to Calcutta to show them to Abanindranath who was very pleased with his work and arranged for its exhibition and ensured proper sale of the paintings. Some of the paintings were sold at Mumbai in an exhibition organized by Vishwa Bharati.

With the sale proceeds of his paintings (which amounted to Rs 160) Nishikanto left Bali with a few clothes, a stove to cook on and some other items. He went on a pilgrimage and visited Gaya, Sarnath, Allahabad and Varanasi. One day while meditating on the banks of the river Niranjana, he saw the luminous figure of the Buddha appear and tell him: "Though I have obtained my realization here, I am not confined within its four walls." When Nishikanto told the local Buddhist priests about his vision they refused to believe him on the ground that one who had attained Nirvana could not return to the earth. Nishikanto was offered a permanent abode by the pandits of Sarnath but he declined. [6]

At Bodhgaya, he met with a distant relative of Nirodbaran Talukdar and came to know about the one who would soon become his gurubhai. "Nirodbaran is his name? Is he whom I have seen in my vision? Then I am bound for Pondicherry." [The background: one day Tagore had asked Nishikanto to give a name to one of the heroes of his novel and Nishikanto had suggested "Nirodbaran." As he uttered the name a bright face had 'loomed before' him. Tagore was pleased with the name but he changed it to Nirodranjan as it meant lightning while Nirodbaran meant dark cloud.] [7]

And Nirodbaran adds: "My relative also added fuel to his desire, as if Pondicherry Yoga hospital was the best asylum for anyone who was distracted by a vairagya mania. No permission nor consideration of adhikara was needed! It was hardly known to the outside world that the Ashram was a sanctuary where none could stay, nor even enter without a previous permission." [8]

But Nishikanto was unaware of such detail. With a heart full of joy, faith and conviction he set out for Pondicherry. His inner self cried out:

Many a song have I sung just for the sake of singing,

Many a talk have I delivered just for the sake of talking.

Now let my songs bring communion with Thee,

Let the creepers of my talks blossom with Thy flowers in glee.

Enough have I played for the sake of playing;

Let the hours now pass in Your play enjoying,

All that is imperfect be perfected in me." [9]

### **Arrival in Pondicherry**

Nishikanto arrived in Pondicherry in February 1934 (though there seems to be a confusion regarding the exact month of his arrival since some letters written by Sri Aurobindo to Dilip Kumar Roy indicate that he was in Pondicherry in 1933). He knew no one in the Ashram but had heard that Dilip Kumar had facilitated the admission of many an aspirant in the Ashram.

Dilip Kumar was then residing at Trèsor House, a mansion situated near the beach which is now known as Trèsor Nursing Home, spending his days in creative pursuits which included poetic and musical creations (which were his medium of doing the Integral Yoga) and epistolary exchanges with Sri Aurobindo. He had blended art and yoga and was marching on the path and throughout the Ashram he was known as the 'spoilt-child' of Sri Aurobindo who would pack-up

his luggage and get ready to leave the Ashram whenever he suffered from the attacks of depression.

One day a guest arrived at Trèsor House; he had uncombed hair, unimpressive appearance and was dressed shabbily; but Dilip Kumar didn't fail to notice the fire that was burning in his eyes. The guest was none other than Nishikanto. He introduced himself as a former student of Kalabhavan who learnt poetry under Rabindranath and painting under Abanindranath Tagore. He told Dilip Kumar about his interest in Sri Aurobindo's Integral Yoga and added that he had come to the Pondicherry to receive initiation from the Lord. He said that he was aware of Dilip Kumar's 'capacity of fruitful intervention in such matters' [10] and confessed that it was because of this reason that he had come to Dilip Kumar. Nishikanto's simplicity impressed Dilip Kumar. When he inquired where was Nishikanto staying, he learnt that Nishikanto's temporary dwelling was a cheap Tamil hotel. Dilip Kumar told him that he was most welcome to have his meals at Trèsor House; though reluctant initially Nishikanto agreed when Dilip Kumar insisted. Then Dilip Kumar inquired what did Nishikanto intend to do to spend his time in Pondicherry as Sri Aurobindo's Darshan wouldn't be possible till the next Darshan date. Nishikanto replied: "I would either compose poetry or paint"; but then he added that since he didn't have any brush or colours he would pen poetry. [11]

Thus started a friendship that was to last forever. Dilip Kumar was a jeweller who always looked for fresh talent; just as a jeweller recognizes the actual worth of a jewel so did Dilip Kumar spot the poetic genius of Nishikanto. Both of them began to spend the greater part of the day in Trèsor House where Nishikanto cooked his meals on his stove and the rest of the day was spent in creative activities in Dilip Kumar's company.

About Nishikanto's arrival in Pondicherry Nirodbaran notes: "Meanwhile word went round that a 'big' poet had come to the Ashram." [12]

Suresh Chakravorty alias Moni went to meet Nishikanto. The Mother on her part sent Nolini Kanta Gupta to Nishikanto; what follows is a gist of their conversation:

Nolini: So you want to stay in this Ashram?

Nishikanto: Yes, Sir.

Nolini: But do you know this Ashram is not like other Ashrams you have been to. Here great and equal freedom is given to all—boys and girls, men and women alike. You have not seen the like before. It may go against your sensibilities and moral standards. That will not do.

Nishikanto: Yet I would like to stay here. [13]

Dilip Kumar wrote to Sri Aurobindo requesting him to accept Nishikanto as his disciple and an inmate of the Ashram. Sri Aurobindo told Dilip Kumar to send a photograph of Nishikanto to him. After looking at Nishikanto's photograph Sri Aurobindo informed Dilip Kumar that Nishikanto wouldn't be able to practise the Integral Yoga and added that he would have to undergo severe physical suffering. Dilip Kumar was disappointed and so was Nishikanto but there was a strong determination in him that made him appeal to Sri Aurobindo once again. The fact that his body would be subjected to immense suffering was known to him since his boyhood years (it was predicted by the Vaishanava sage) but at the same time he was determined to have only Sri Aurobindo as his Guru and the pole-star of his life. Till then he hadn't had the darshan of the Mother. One day in the evening while standing on the road he saw the Mother walking on the terrace of the Ashram main building. At once he recognized her as the one whom he had seen

in one of his visions. He also saw around her head an aura of blue snakes. And from his pen took birth the unforgettable song:

The paths of Earth today are sanctified

With the touch of the Mother's footfalls rapture-rife:

Lo! the grey dust awakes rich, rainbow-dyed,

And bloom the gardened carnivals of life!

Under the aegis of thy feet

We like flower-clusters fragrance sweet

Aroused from age-long sleep, O Mother Divine,

Wake to Thy love and blossom in Thy sunshine.

Long have we lived, lost, playing with the sod:

Oblivious—we were nurslings of Thy Light...

Mating with earth, absorbed into the clod:

But now we quiver into flames gold-bright.

From Thy own galaxy hast Thou

Writ large Thy star-lore on our brow;

In a world, festival of lights now shine!

What Paradise-garlands of Thy fires divine! [14]

On Dilip Kumar's insistence and being informed that Nishikanto had left his home at the age of fifteen and spent a considerable period under the aegis of an ascetic, Sri Aurobindo and the Mother consented to accept him as a disciple since he had 'undergone so much tapasya and might be given a chance' but Sri Aurobindo warned him once again that "he would come to know and see many things, as he had the eyes of a visionary but he must be on his guard." [15]

The news of Nishikanto's acceptance not only elated Dilip Kumar but all those Ashramites who had in the meantime fallen in love with the simple genius. He was given a room in the ground-floor of the house on whose first floor resided Harindranath Chattopadhyaya; later he was shifted to 'Santal House' where he spent the longest period of his life. "The house was named by the Mother 'Santal' as it had a small sandalwood tree in the adjoining garden. There was a big Bakula tree (*Mimosops elengi*) showering numerous cream-coloured and deeply fragrant flowers which the Mother has named 'Patience'." [16]

### **Flowering of the Poetic Genius**

His life's aspiration was fulfilled and the following words describe his inner feeling in the most appropriate way:

O Mother, in Thy lap of the sky

Smiling like the baby Moon I shall stay,

Swinging in the waves of Thy Light

Like the stars of the Milky Way;

I shall blossom beside the parijat flowers

At the source from where the gentle wind blows

With Thy eternal spring to play... [17]

And he craved:

Set the sail today, O Mother

Hold in Thy hands the rudder.

Let my boat move on and sway

Guided by Thy Pole Star.

Let me pass the whole of this day

On Thy shore, in its every quay,

With Thy playful Mandakini river...

Let my voice be in tune

With the birds singing in Thy nest:

Let me be the honey-bee

Among the flowers in Thy garden secret.

Hold me today, O Mother

In the string of gems You wear,

My consciousness shining at its best...

Let my days and nights pass

Dipped in the splendour of Thy body's glow

And remain prostrate at Thy Lotus-feet

Adoring Thy form aglow;  
Ravished by the touch of those feet  
Let the morns and eves be ecstatic,  
From each hour's veena a sweetness flow...  
A lot have I heard about the divine truth,  
Drew in the net of arguments a lot;  
Suffered a lot of hesitant hours,  
Scattered many a seed of doubt;  
Now the lamp of my realisation  
Burns in a flame without motion  
Today have I been to Thy delight-spot. [18]

Meanwhile Tagore was quite tensed about Nishikanto's well-being as he didn't know where and how he was. When Dilip Kumar informed Tagore about Nishikanto's joining the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, he wrote to the former: "I am pleased to learn that Nishikanto has gone to your Ashram. There is a latent talent in him. If he can stay in your Ashram then his strength would be enhanced. I am aware of his uniqueness since long. He has a spontaneous creativity and he is not deficient in self-dependence. His thought-power would automatically gain perfection if he gets the right kind of ambience at Pondicherry." [19]

The doors of unknown vistas were opened to Nishikanto as soon as he started practising the Integral Yoga. His poetry took a new turn and what came out from his pen mesmerized the reader. Nirodbaran writes: 'Nishikanto's genius made me cap him with the title of "*kavi, kaviraj*" [poet, king of poets] and the name caught the popular imagination...His poems had taken a mystic spiritual turn...' [20]

And Dhiraj Banerjee notes: "Even in this new environment Nishikanto's writing went apace with undiminished interest. If anybody paid him a visit in the afternoon, he could see [Nishikanto] absorbed in his creative work, sitting at a table for hours. And he would happily read out his creations to those who went to visit him...He was drawing inspiration from some deeper planes of consciousness than the ordinary poetic intelligence. Streams of poetry came flowing through his mind either in one language or the other." [21]

And he adds: "Nishikanto's poesy also started being infused with spirituality—in its mood or feeling, in its rhythm and tone. In relation to his earlier products there appeared to be a great difference, an earth and heaven difference." [22]

Not only were his works marked by some profound and distinct touches of integral spirituality but it also had some marvellous compositions on the Mother and Sri Aurobindo as well. In fact the most notable poems in Bengali written on them were created by Nishikanto. The infinite love he received from the Mother made his heart exclaim:

Effulgent Mother, aureate as the sun,  
Who com'st to reave our ignorance shadow-spun,—  
Thou art incarnate on our dismal earth  
To unfold secrets of an Immortal birth:  
O luminous lore from the heart of paradise,  
At thy flower-like feet the Soul, in homage, lies.  
Thy advent, a deep precipitate of Light,  
Annihilates our glooms on aeoned Night.  
Thy sentinel Gleam on life's peaks knows no sleep  
And scintillates in jewels of the deep  
Revealing in a flash eternities:  
At thy flower-like feet the Soul, in homage, lies.  
Lone-poised beyond the pauseless swirl of Time,  
Beyond the atoms and the Vast sublime,  
Things sentient thou hast with thy love ensouled:  
Equal and warm, unique and manifold.  
Hues' thrills are thy refracted ecstasies:  
At thy flower-like feet the Soul, in homage, lies.  
A mystic Healer of our stricken life,  
Leavening with love our squalor, pain and strife,  
Thou slayest still the demon-hordes with thine  
Infinite strength and quellest undivine  
And dark rebellions with thy swift sunrise:  
At thy flower-like feet the Soul, in homage, lies...  
With the King of mystic seers in union,  
Stationed in bliss, thou farest free and lone:

Thy footfalls usher magic floods in sands

Life and extinction rock in thy twin hands.

O thou revered of the last infinities!

At thy flower-like feet, the Soul, in homage lies. [23]

### **A New Genre of Poetry**

Soon after Nishikanto joined the Ashram he became Dilip Kumar's collaborator in poetic creations and experiments; they experimented with rhyme and rhythm and went on to create a new genre of poetry. Nishikanto composed new songs based on the tunes of existing songs which were later published in the book Geetashri co-written with Dilip Kumar. Sometimes Sri Aurobindo participated in their experiments; for instance, in response to one of their experiments, Sri Aurobindo wrote (keeping the rhythm intact):

In a flaming as of spaces

Curved like spires

An epiphany of faces,

Long curled fires,

The illumined and tremendous

Masque drew near,

A god-pageant of the aeons

Vast, deep-hued,

And the thunder of its paeans,

Wide-winged, nude

In their harmony stupendous,

Smote earth's ear.

And

To the hill-tops of silence from over the infinite sea,

Golden he came,

Armed with the flame,

Looked on the world that his greatness and passion must free.

Or

Oh, but fair was her face as she lolled in her green-tinted robe,  
Emerald trees,  
Sapphire seas,  
Sun-ring and moon-ring that glittered and hung in each lobe.

(Same rhythm as above)

And

In the ending of time, in the sinking of space

What shall survive?

Hearts once alive,

Beauty and charm of a face?

Nay, these shall be safe in the breast of the One,

Man deified,

World-spirits wide,

Noting ends, all but began. [24]

It was while experimenting with rhythm that Dilip Kumar discovered that Nishikanto was a lyricist of the highest rank. Every evening Nishikanto used to come to Trèsor House with his latest compositions which Dilip Kumar sang in his musical soirees after setting tune to them. In fact the lyrics of most of Dilip Kumar's famous songs were penned by Nishikanto and the song through which Dilip Kumar discovered the lyricist in him was:

He's caught, the Elusive, in our earth of clay:

On stands of Life His footfalls ring in play.

Who sets the sun and stars afloat

On swirls of Time—He steers the boat,

I know, of my frail body, night and day.

I play no flute, I play no lyre—not I:

My tunes are cradled in His melody.

I walk because He also walks,

I talk because He also talks:

On Death's stem blows His Immortality. [25]

Dilip Kumar's music and Nishikanto's lyrics led to the creation of a number of memorable songs which resulted in the emergence of a storm in the world of Bengali music; among them the most notable ones were *Ei prithibir pather pore*, *Jwalbar mantra dile more*, *Andharer ei dharani*, *Eje kon karmanasha*, *Ogo diyo na*, *Puja amar sango holo*, *Tomar andhar nishai andhar pohabe*, *Hey konokojwalo sabita barani* to name a few. At the same time Nishikanto went on creating verses which could be strictly termed as "Nishikantonion." His first book of poems *Alakananda* was published in 1940 and was followed by *Diganta* and *Pachishe Pradip* in 1945, *Diner Suryo*, *Bhorer Pakhi* and *Dream Cadences* in 1946, *Vaijayanti* in 1947, *Vande Mataram* in 1949 and *Nabadipan* in 1951.

"Whether it is in Bengali or in English, Nishikanto's poems are both emphatic and beautiful. The poet and the artist seem to have combined well in his creations... The keynote of his poetry consists mainly of spiritual feelings or experiences. He was poet, mystic and aspirant in one... Nishikanto had an innate capacity to accord the correct type of stanza to a poem. Numberless are the patterns of stanzas which he composed. It is not uncommon to find refrains in his poetry; and in general these repetitive lines give some good effects... Nishikanto became known as a lyric poet, his lines overflow with music. But the writer channelises this passionate effusion with various patterns of rhyme and rhythm. He even composed poems in the difficult Sanskrit measures, and yet they seem to be but deft and effortless creations. One gets an impression of smooth movement... Even though Nishikanto's language and diction aren't quite the same as in modern books of poetry, and are ornate like the Sanskrit rhetorics, even then his verses have what modern readers like: poetic imagery and metaphors. In his poetry the preponderance of the feelings of devotion is visible..." [26] And he rightly observes:

Among the poets of the post-Tagore period the signs of talent that Nishikanto manifested through his various creative writings in a style which was free from the trends of his time is not unknown to the adherents of poetry. His specialty in the handling of symbolism, in the effortless use of words and expressions, and in his joyous inspiration of a mainly spiritual kind, has impressed his readers.

The waves of various feelings, a stream of expressions and rhythm, abundance of metaphors and imageries are the characteristics of Nishikanto's writings.

In his verses all the emotions of the poet seek to attain an inner illumination. He belongs to that category of poets for whom poetry is a reflection of truth. Therefore it is not just a figment of imagination, it is also a practical seeking for spiritual values. With his mastery of language the formations that Nishikanto builds with words are actually a means to understand what is formless and fundamental; in the descriptions of nature is mirrored that which is super-nature. He has fashioned all of the poetic imagery with the grace of the spirit and placed it over the emotions and passions; in the process the technique of language and rhythm which he created is perhaps something new in our modern literature.

In his creations we find not only an expression of the intuitive faculty, but also a clarity of vision, a harmony of thoughts, feelings of strength, and an inherent gracefulness. [27]

On reading the works of Nishikanto, one is compelled to ponder the source of the inspiration which made him write such exquisite poems. Nishikanto himself has answered this question:

Inspirations come

From a God-white source—

And my heart-beats drum

To their wide-open force. [28]

And about himself and his poetry he says:

I am a pilgrim-poet on the ways of the world,

My poems are surging upon Time's ocean,

Around my life's stone-torpor ages have swirled,

Far-calling fountain voices of deep emotion. [29]

Dhiraj Banerjee observes: "It may be noted that Nishikanto's poetry doesn't owe its status to the spiritual alone. His output was of a diverse character, and had many technical qualities. There are ornamentation, aestheticism and symbolism. He is known for his penchant for symbolist poetry. We find that thought, image and dream elements are reflected through symbols in the light of his vision. His poetry achieved quality not only because of these experiences as a spiritual seeker, but also because they are combined with his subtle sensibility proper to an artist and his literary technique. This imagist has seen the world and life through the eyes of a mystic, a visionary." [30]

### **Sri Aurobindo on Nishikanto's Poetry**

Sri Aurobindo was quite appreciative of Nishikanto's poems; what follows are some of his comments on Nishikanto's poetry. Note that at some places Nishikanto has been spelt as Nishikanta; the author has only quoted what is printed in the text:

# [Nishikanto] got a touch here which brought out in him some powerful force of vital vision and word that certainly had not shown any signs of existing before...

# Nishikanta came out in much the same way, a sudden Brahmaputra of inspiration.

# Nishikanta's [poetry] comes straight from the vital vision and knocks you in the pit of your stomach. He does not repeat his images...and they are exceedingly striking and forceful. They are of one type...

Regarding a comparison between the poetry of Nirodbaran and Nishikanto:

#It is certainly a difficult to keep them together, especially as Nishikanta's stanzas are strong and fiery and yours are delicate and plaintive. It is like a strong robustuous fellow and a delicate slender one walking in a leash—they don't quite coalesce.

# Power is [Nishikanto's] main element.

# [Nishikanto] has poetical ideas and he develops them in his poems. A poet need not have intellectual ideas to be great...When Nishikanta started writing, I said his poems were "vital", but he made great progress afterwards.

# [Nishikanto] is trying to put force and strength into his poetry. One has to be very careful when trying new things that they don't become heavy. He has a remarkable gift of rhythm...

# [Regarding Nishikanto's poetry] ...it was a stroke of genius...It is indeed a remarkable effort, full of beauty and power...

# Nishikanta has imagination and the ideas carry beauty in [his poetry]...

# Nishikanta's poem on the Bazaar is very good work admirably done—he is evidently a craftsman in language and rhythm... There is however some power of developing a poetic subject which is full of promise.

# Nishikanta's poetry has undergone a great change. I did not appreciate it very highly because it was too vital and turbid, but on his sonnets he has acquired a power of substance, clarity and order which raises his work to a much higher level. He has certainly justified himself as a poet.

# [Nishikanto] has a remarkable gift of music and language and of skilful weaving of sound and work...In order to equal or surpass Tagore he has to develop a power of deep feeling and deep significance equal to his other powers and arrive at a perfect equation or balance between sound + language and sense...Nishikanta of course often does that and his work is then truly remarkable.

# Nishikanta has indeed bloomed out, but with his great facility of diction and rhythm he must be careful to keep his substance up to the mark as he did in the sonnets.

# [Nishikanto's] rhythms are indeed wonderful. What a gift.

# Nishikanta's poem is as usual full of poetic energy and admirable rhythm.

# Nishikanta's [poem] as always, is rich and beautiful, but of another manner.

# Nishikanta seems to want a movement which will give more volume, strength and sonority that Bengali verse can succeed in creating but is yet poetry, not prose arranged in lines such as most free verse seems to me to be or at the best poetic prose cut into lines of different lengths. All things can be tried—the test is success—true poetic excellence. Nishikanta has sent me some of his gadya chhanda [free verse] before which seemed to me to have much flow and energy...

# Nishikanta seems to have put himself into contact with an inexhaustible source of flowing word and rhythm—with the world of sound-music, which is one province of the World of Beauty. It is part of the vital World no doubt and the joy that comes of contact with that beauty is vital—but it is a subtle vital which is not merely sensuous. It is one of the powers by which the substance of the consciousness can be refined and prepared for sensibility to a still higher beauty and Ananda. Also it can be made a vehicle for the expression of the highest things. The Veda, the Upanishads, the Mantra everywhere owe half its power to the rhythmic sound that embodies it.

Defining the poetic characteristics of Nirobaran and Nishikanto:

# Yours [Nirodbaran's] is a flute, Nishikanta's is a drum.

Regarding Nishikanto's correction of a poem composed by Nirodbaran, Sri Aurobindo informed the latter: "My God, he has pummeled you into pieces and thrown away all but a few shreds. No,

you can't call it yours. Perhaps you can label it, 'Nirod after being devoured, assimilated and eliminated by Nishikanta.' ”

# [Nishikanto] is writing of experiences that are foreign to the ordinary mentality.

# Nishikanta has a fine channel and with a very poetic turn in it—he offers no resistance to the flow of the force, no interference of his mental ego, only the convenience of his mental individuality.

# [Nishikanta] has a strong individuality of his own as a poet and at the same time a great assimilative power.

### **Nishikanto in the talks with Sri Aurobindo**

Apropos of Nishikanto let's quote some passages from the talks Sri Aurobindo had with his disciples:

#### **7 January 1940**

[Sri Aurobindo was shown by Nirodbaran Nishikanto's new poem in *matra-vritta* blank verse]

Sri Aurobindo: How do you find the rhythm?

Nirodbaran: It seems all right. How do you find it?

Sri Aurobindo: I can't say as I am not familiar with this *chhandā* (rhythm and metre).

Nirodbaran: I asked Dilip today what he thought about Nishikanto's new *chhandā*. Nishikanto had told me Dilip had found it very successful. Dilip said, "It is a misrepresentation. Please tell Guru about it." ...I told him that his overflows were very good but here and there there was roughness. I gave him a hint but he didn't take it."

Sri Aurobindo: I also had the impression that there was much weightage and crowding of things.

Nirodbaran: I also thought there must be something wrong. Otherwise you wouldn't have asked me...Dilip says that when Nishikanto tries to do something consciously he makes mistakes. He is trying many new things.

Sri Aurobindo: He is trying to put force and strength into his poetry. One has to be very careful when trying new things that they don't become heavy. He has a remarkable gift of rhythm... [31]

#### **17 January 1940**

[Tagore's letter to Nishikanto was read out to Sri Aurobindo by Nirodbaran; in the letter Tagore says that though Nishikanto is a real artist and his expressions and rhythm are of a very high order but there is a lack of variety in his poems and adds that he was like a "one-stringed lyre" while the "poetic mind demands a variety of tunes."]

Sri Aurobindo: It really comes to this: "You can't be a great poet unless you write like me!" ...Take, for instance, Francis Thompson's *Hound of Heaven*. How many people understand and appreciate it? Does it follow that Thompson is not a great poet? Milton is not understood by many. He is not a great poet then?... What does it matter if there is no variety? Homer has

written only on war and action. Can Tagore say that he is a greater poet than Homer? Sappho wrote only on love: is she not a great poet? Milton also has no variety and yet he is one of the greatest poets. Mirabai has no variety either and she is still great... Shakespeare too has his limitations... But why should a great poet write on everything—even on matters in which he is not interested? People who are leading a spiritual life naturally express truth and experience of that life... Greatness of poetry doesn't depend on [variety] but on whether the thing that has been created is great or not. Browning has a lot of variety. Can you say that he is a greater poet than Milton? ...

Nirodbaran: Tagore means to say that everybody must have variety like himself. Nishikanto saw in a vision that Tagore was satirising Nishikanto's expressions like "light-fountain" before people and saying, "What is this light-fountain?" [32]

### **19 January 1940**

Nirodbaran: Talking of J and Nishikanto, I find that the latter hasn't the former's subtlety and delicacy of expression.

Sri Aurobindo: A poet need not have these things in order to be great.

Nirodbaran: No. Nishikanto always gives the impression of power.

Sri Aurobindo: Yes, power is his main element...

Nirodbaran: You think that Nishikanto has intellectual substance?

Sri Aurobindo: I believe he has... By the way, I don't understand why X says that Nishikanto has no ideas.

Nirodbaran: What he says is that Nishikanto lacks intellectual substance.

Sri Aurobindo: What do you mean by that? You mean philosophical thought?

Nirodbaran: I think he means ideas such as A.E. has, for instance.

Sri Aurobindo: But he has poetical ideas and he develops them in his poems. A poet need not have intellectual ideas to be great... When Nishikanto started writing, I said his poems were "vital", but he made great progress afterwards.

Nirodbaran: Some of his poems are even psychic.

Sri Aurobindo: His *Bullock Cart* is certainly psychic.

### **20 January 1940**

[Nirodbaran read out to Sri Aurobindo Tagore's letter to Nishikanto praising his book *Alakananda*. Sri Aurobindo was very glad and exclaimed, "Oh", and at the end said, "That's wonderful."]

Purani: ... [Tagore] has been forced to admit Nishikanto's quality...

Nirodbaran: Now he finds that his two grievances have been satisfied: first his “common people” and then the variety because Nishikanto has made it a representative collection... I asked Nolini yesterday what people like Tagore mean by saying that only Nishikanto has an easy mastery over the language while others have not. [This refers to a letter written by Tagore to an Ashramite in which he remarks: “Among you, Nishikanto alone has proved his easy mastery over language.”] He says that he means that our language is rather forced, not spontaneous or easy.

Sri Aurobindo: “Forced” means something created by the mind?

Nirodbaran: I believe so.

Sri Aurobindo: Then it is not true. It is, on the other hand, something coming down from above by inspiration. [34]

### **23 January 1940**

Nirodbaran: Nishikanto asks why at times he is seized with a repugnance for writing poetry. He burned a lot of his works at Santiniketan during such seizures. Here also attacks come occasionally and he questions himself, “What is the use of writing after all?” And this hampers his work, he says.

Sri Aurobindo: These moods come to many people. They are a kind of Tamas (inertia) which should not be indulged in.

Nirodbaran: Nishikanto says that it would be useful not to write if he could meditate or think of the Divine instead. This he can’t do. “Then why not write?” he argues, but the feeling of repugnance comes all the same.

Sri Aurobindo: It has to be rejected...

Nirodbaran: Nishikanto was asking if you would write an appreciation of his book.

Sri Aurobindo: For publication?

Nirodbaran: Yes. I replied that you would never do it. He argued that you had done it for Dilip. I asked: “Where?” And I added, “Sri Aurobindo has only given his opinion poem by poem as he has also done in your case. If Dilip published the opinions, it was his own doing.”

Sri Aurobindo: Quite so. I cannot write a public appreciation for a member of my own Ashram. Tagore has given his appreciation. That should be enough. [35]

### **24 March 1940**

Nirodbaran: One criticism of Nishikanto’s book is out.

Sri Aurobindo: I was wondering why no criticism had been made by anybody. What does it say?

Nirodbaran: It is by Buddhadev. He says that Nishikanto, by using fine images and rhythms, gives us pictures as well as sound-patterns so that both eye and ear get plenty of joy.

Sri Aurobindo: Well, what more does he want?

Nirodbaran: He is lamenting over Nishikanto's exclusion of his prose-poems and also his previous poetry. Bengalis think that his early work was wonderful.

Sri Aurobindo: I didn't see anything in it. Does Nishikanto think like them?

Nirodbaran: Perhaps not. Buddhadev says that there are seeds of a great poet in him but they are likely to be spoiled if he remains secluded in the Pondicherry Ashram. The complaint is that he writes in the same way and on the same subject all the time.

Sri Aurobindo: He surely doesn't write in the same way. As for the subject, others also write on the same subject, their own, though other than Nishikanto's.

Nirodbaran: These people seem to be too much enamoured of their prose-poems. They think prose-poetry is a great creation. [36]

### **31 March 1940**

Nirodbaran: Nishikanto says that Becharlal has asked for his poems.

Sri Aurobindo: Why does he want them when he says they are too philosophic and thus unfit for publication?

Nirodbaran: Nishikanto asks the same question and, besides, he wonders why one who speaks against the Ashram should want them.

Sri Aurobindo: But since he is asking for them Nishikanto can send them. Criticism is no reason why poems shouldn't be sent. And Becharlal himself doesn't want his criticism to be taken seriously: otherwise why should he ask for poems he doesn't like?

Purani: Yes, and if the poems are published the public will see that Becharlal is himself going against his own criticism.

Nirodbaran: According to Bhattacharya, there seems to be a section of the public in Calcutta that says Nishikanto lacks a little refinement in poetry.

Sri Aurobindo: In what way?

[Nirodbaran explains how Nishikanto's usage of words like womb, prostitute, worm, insect, phlegm and buttocks is being criticized. Sri Aurobindo refutes all criticisms.]

Nirodbaran: Have you seen Nishikanto's song sent to you the other day by Dilip?

Sri Aurobindo: Yes, what about it?

Nirodbaran: There is one expression in it—"own dream"—about which there is a dispute. Nishikanto says he has used the first part of it in the sense of the Self, which Dilip says nobody will understand and should be changed.

Sri Aurobindo: Yes, it can't be taken as the Self; but I understood it to mean one's self dream which one can't get away from. It is one's own creation and has not been imposed upon one and one has to fulfil it. In that sense it is all right.

Nirodbaran: Dilip says that what the poet has tried to express is not important: what is important is whether the expression has come right and people will understand it in that sense. According to him, Nishikanto's word will be understood as "own dream".

Sri Aurobindo: It is not a question of understanding only. The feeling too has to be considered. We must see whether one feels something even if one does not understand.

Nirodbaran: Nishikanto says that we have to see the drift of the whole poem instead of considering a single expression taken separately. His whole poem's idea, he says, is that what appears as "illusion" or "dream" is not "dream", it is something real of one's own Self. If that word is changed, the entire meaning will be spoiled. The two words coming together have produced the emphasis.

Sri Aurobindo: He is quite right. If the word is changed, the lyrical beauty of the poem will be spoiled. One has also to see the implication.

Nirodbaran: Nishikanto seems to agree with Dilip. Dilip goes too much by the mind: what is intellectually not clear to him is suspect.

Sri Aurobindo: Yes, he follows the old tradition of his father and others. Here the poetry is trying to be suggestive. In his own poetry intellectuality is quite in place. [37]

### **1 April 1940**

Purani: Amal was asking if you would be publishing any poetry.

Sri Aurobindo: Poetry? Perhaps after thirty years. Considering the criticism of Nishikanto's poetry it seems better to write for private reading than for publication. [38]

### **8 August 1940:**

Purani: You have seen *Patrika*'s review of Nishikanta's book? While Tagore has praised his *chhanda*[rhythm] and *bhāshā* [language], people call it halting and Sanskritised.

Sri Aurobindo: Stupid review. [39]

### **9 August 1940**

Nirodbaran: Charu Dutt doesn't seem to consider Nishikanta's poetry in *Alakananda* as first class.

Sri Aurobindo: Is he a good judge of poetry?

Nirodbaran: I don't think so.

Sri Aurobindo: Then his opinion has no value.

Nirodbaran: He didn't, at first reading, understand the poems. After he had read them over and over again, they were clear to him, he said.

Sri Aurobindo: What kind of a mind these people have, I wonder!

Nirodbaran: They are very simple poems, except for one or two.

Sri Aurobindo: Quite so.

Nirodbaran: And people object to Nishikanta's poems because they are all centred on the Mother and yourself, not so much because they are spiritual or lack variety.

Sri Aurobindo: How do they know about the Mother?

Purani: The poems can very well be taken as addressed to the Divine Mother.

Sri Aurobindo: Yes. Besides, all poems are not like that—*Garur Gadi*, for instance. He has variety too. Of course they are spiritual and mystic. [40]

### **Sri Aurobindo regarding Nishikanta's poems**

Let's quote a few remarks of Sri Aurobindo regarding Nishikanta's poems:

*Swarnashishu* [*The Golden Child*]: "I suppose the golden child is the Truth-soul which follows after the silver light of the spiritual. When it plunges into the black craters of the subconscious, it releases from it the spiritual light and the sevenfold streams of the Divine Energy and cleaning itself of the stains of the subconscious, it prepares its flight towards the supreme Divine (The Mother). It is a very beautiful poem."

*Mānassarovar*: "It is certainly very powerful and beautiful. By O.P. I presume you mean Overhead Poetry. That I can't say—the substance seems to be from there, but a certain kind of rhythm is also needed which I find more difficult to decide about in Bengali than in English."

*Abhrayamān*: "Exceedingly fine all through. I don't know whether there is not the achieved access to the overhead substance and movement in it—it looks rather like that."

*Jyotirmoyo Sharmeyo* [*The Luminous Dog*]: "The *satadal* [lotus] is, I suppose, the lotus of the higher consciousness represented here in a house; the *krishnakāye louhokalsi* [the dark iron-pitcher] must represent a formation in the subconscious. The poem is fine and the form a great improvement on your previous attempt at free verse."

*Mā* [*The Mother*]: "Very fine. Occult vision—very powerful—each word and symbol expresses the truth. [Addressed to Nishikanta] About your vision. It came as an answer to your call for the removal of ugly things in your own nature and you were shown how it would be effectively done. First a vivid realisation was given of what the lower nature is, its terrible darkness and ugliness in which men contentedly live. But having realised its true nature a cry came from your lower nature itself for the change. You were then shown the light of the higher nature by whose descent the change could come—the white light of the Mother's consciousness and a flame of it descended into you by the usual path and filled you with the light. From there it descended into the subconscious and brought the light there. As a result the consciousness (it was the inner consciousness) became like a crystal pillar connecting the heights with the depths, the superconscious with the subconscious. In it the image of the Mother filled with the light in her. You were then shown a symbol of the *rupāntar*, the change in the universal Nature. This change was only in seed and in symbol. Afterwards this part of the vision disappeared and you saw again the darkness of the lower Nature. But in you the light was there still and the assurance that it brings. For it is in the individual that the change first must come and it is with the light and faith in the individual as a support that the wider change can be made."

*Subornoshikhor [The Golden Summit]:* “If you take the plane as the ordinary life or physical consciousness with the sky as the ordinary mind and the mountain as the hill of the Divine Truth with the moonlight cloud as the spiritual Call (the moon is the symbol of the spiritual mind) and the birds as souls called by the Truth, I think the significance of the details of the vision will be clear to you.”

*Rājhamsa [The Swan]:* “It is truly a marvellous success...he [Nishikanto] has justified the *laghu-gurumetre* altogether, sustaining a perfect naturalness and fluency through out such a long poem.”

*Srigal-Trishnā [The Thirst of a Fox]:* “I suppose the meaning is that the lower vital desire leaving the spiritual control, destroying the soul-forces and those that make for the higher victory is received into the inner door of the sunconscient (instead of going up towards the Superconscient) and therefore satisfies its thirst with the satisfaction of the subconscious impulses. These are the things out of which the lower triple consciousness (mind, vital or physical) is evolved in its most violent and inferior manifestations spending in the *nābhir ballari* [the navel] of Savitri. The sun in *pātāl* [hell] is the sun of the Inconscient, the involved Consciousness which keeps all things in itself and brings them out by the fire of evolution *bikāsh banhite* [the fire of manifestation],—Savitri is the energy of the Sun, but all belongs to the veiled lower manifestation.”

### **The eyes of a visionary**

The Mother has said about Nishikanto that he had the eyes of a visionary and he has claimed that almost all of his visions had come to him when his eyes were open. R Prabhakar tells us: “He often went down to the ‘Old Balcony’ (Ashram) at an hour when for us the Mother was apparently not there. Surely he did not go just to see the Balcony. It is said that he could see the Mother there.” [41] What follows are the descriptions of some of the visions and their interpretations:

Once in a vision Nishikanto saw a *mahā śūnya*, Total Void. Then he saw a star emerge in that Void and when it vanished, its place was taken by a beautiful green moon. Beneath it stood a magnificent verdant tree, innumerable birds flitted around it and the tree was bathed by the effulgence of the green moon. After some time the green moon vanished as well and a sapphire moon was seen in a blue sky with its rays falling on all creation. Eventually the green moon vanished too and a golden moon was seen with golden rays radiating from it. When Nishikanto wrote to Sri Aurobindo asking him the significance of the vision, the Guru replied that the ‘star’ which emerged in the Void was the Creatrix—the Mother; the green moon was Rama and his light was falling on the verdant tree symbolizing the creation; the blue moon was Krishna with his light permeating the creation and the golden moon symbolized the Future Avatar.

Once on the occasion of his birthday Nishikanto had gone to the Mother to offer his obeisance to her. After blessing him the Mother concentrated on his head with one hand. Nishikanto went into a trance and had the vision of Sri Aurobindo who vanished and in his place he saw the Mother as the *Rajarajeshwari* (the Queen of queens). After the concentration Nishikanto informed the Mother about his vision and asked why did Sri Aurobindo vanish and why did he not see the Mother and Sri Aurobindo together. The Mother replied: “Sri Aurobindo and I are one. It does not matter that you saw us as two.”

On another occasion: The Mother was mounting the staircase of the Meditation Hall; below Nishikanto stood among a host of other people. All of a sudden he saw the Buddha standing behind the Mother. He shut his eyes for a moment to ascertain if it was a trick of his imagination

or a hallucination, but on opening his eyes he still saw the Buddha there. He looked around to see if others had also noticed anything, but there was no trace of wonder on the faces of those around him. He concluded that the Buddha was visible only to him. Then the Buddha vanished and in his place Nishikanto beheld Adi Shankaracharya and when this vision too vanished he saw Swami Vivekananda standing behind the Mother.

Nishikanto was greatly intrigued by what he had seen and when he wrote to the Mother about this triple vision, she replied that what he had seen was correct and that all three had been Vibhūtis of Shiva. [42]

Once Nishikanto saw in a vision a violet stream and a golden cup. In a letter to Nirodbaran, Sri Aurobindo explained the significance of the vision: “ ‘Violet’ is the colour of the benevolence or compassion, but also more vividly of the Divine Grace—represented in the vision as flowing from the heights of the spiritual consciousness down on this earth. The golden cup is I suppose the Truth-Consciousness.”

Once Nishikanto saw in a dream-vision that he was wandering in a dense green forest where he had lost his way; the roar of tiger, the hissing of poisonous snakes, and the cries of the foxes could be heard. When he looked up at the sky he saw some a pale moon and some grey clouds floating around it. When he prayed to the Divine to show him the way, he saw that a silver-coloured moon emerged out of the pale moon and the moonlight fell at the centre of the forest where he saw a beautiful round-shaped *mālāncha* [flower-garden]. Its flowers were bright and silvery. Among the innumerable flowers he could recognize white rose, *rajanigandhā* [tuberose] and white lotus. The birds sitting on it invited him to come to it but he found no way to enter the *mālāncha*. When he tried to enter it a deer came to him and requested him like a human being not to go there and the tigers and the snakes tried to scare him away and the thorns pricked his feet. But still when he tried to enter he saw a ray of light descend from the sky. He also saw that a cloud had touched the moon and piercing its chest the ray was descending. He saw a conch-white road that had gone straight to the heart of the *mālāncha*. He went inside it immediately. Then he heard someone playing the flute and a white peacock appeared before him and began to show him the way. As he walked and looked around he saw that the forest had disappeared and the sky was transformed into a white-blue colour. Even the pale clouds had become silver.

Sri Aurobindo explained the significance of this vision: “The forest is a symbol of the unregenerated *rājasik* vital—the malancha is the psychic in the vital. The moon is the symbol of spiritual light, faint at first, it being cleared and bright and illumining the obscuration of the mind (the cloud) obliges it to allow the higher ray to pass through it. The white peacock is the spiritual victory. The rest is a symbol of the transformation of the vital—or changes into the psychised vital if not the spiritual influence and then a divine call.” [43]

Six years after the publication of Nishikanto’s *Alakananda*, his first book of poems in Bengali, his first and only book of English poetry *Dream Cadences* saw the light of the day in April 1946. The collection consisted of his original poems as well as translation of his poems made by Dilip Kumar Roy. It also included the following song of Nishikanto translated by Sri Aurobindo himself on 7 February 1941:

### **King and Devotee**

The Kings of kings has made you a king,

Your sceptre gave, your throne of gold,

Man and fair maid for retinue,  
Your swords of sheen, your warriors bold,  
Your crown, your flag, your victor-pomps,  
High elephants and steeds of pride,  
The wise to counsel, the strong to serve,  
And queens of beauty at your side.  
To me He gave His alms of grace,  
His little wallet full of songs,  
His azure heavens for my robe,  
His earth, my nest, to me belongs.  
My sleeping room is His wide world,  
Planet and star for bulb and lamp,  
The King of kings who beggared me,  
Walks by my side, a comrade tramp. [44]

In his Foreword to *Dream Cadences*, Kishor Gandhi writes:

The bulk of Nishikanto's poetry is in his native tongue Bengali, in the poetical literature of which he occupies a place of high eminence. He never made any serious attempt to write poetry in English as his knowledge of English metre is almost negligible and his familiarity with the English language is neither deep nor extensive... These poems have a value to those who are interested in the process of poetic creation in as much as whatever poetic merit they have is solely due to the poet's innate sense of rhythm and word-music. The description—'a born poet'—could hardly be applied to anyone with greater appositeness than to Nishikanto, for the poetic vein of speech is for him more like a natural function of his psychological constitution than a cultivated art and the sense for rhythm and subtle sound-body of words which comprise the essence of the poetic faculty is native to his temperament. It would seem that the poet, in his inner being, is in direct contact with some far-away Land of Felicity where the Muse of Poetic Beauty reigns supreme and the unearthly strains of music and the magical hues of that land flow through him unhindered in large streams of haunting melody and captivating vision...

Without the poet having an opening to some such high world of beauty it would be difficult to account for the immediate enchantment his verse lays upon our sensibilities. Without such an opening it would also be impossible to explain the poet's success in writing English poetry with extremely meagre external technical equipment. Nishikanto's success in the field of English poetry would appear to suggest that it is not impossible for an exceptionally gifted and powerful poet to surmount altogether the need of knowing the metrical technique by sheer force of his inborn and intimate sense of the spirit of rhythm and subtle word-music; the invisible Spirit of

Word-Beauty with which he is in direct contact would itself provide him with its intrinsic body-forms, its shapes and structures of visible embodiment.

But what made Nishikanto write in English when he had not much command over the language? The story goes that once while walking on the sea-beach, Dilip Kumar had challenged Nishikanto to write a poem in English. [45] Nishikanto accepted the challenge and approached his guru-bhai Ramachandra to learn English metre and rhythm. Ramachandra gave him the 'push' to write, but he asked Nishikanto to read poetry in English first so that he may 'plunge into the spirit' before learning the rhythm. Eventually he went on to compose twenty-one poems in English which later were included in *Dream Cadences* along with eighteen poems of his translated by Dilip Kumar. 'When he was asked...from where he had picked up such English that he could produce good poetry, his reply always was, "Is it I who write these poems? It is the guru who is getting them written through me.'" [46]

### **Sri Aurobindo's Comments**

Nirodbaran's correspondence with Sri Aurobindo reflects the discussions his fellow-sadhaks had with the Guru regarding the development of his poetic faculty in English.

Nirodbaran: Here is Nishikanto's poem. Just think of it—a fellow who never has written a single line in English and doesn't know it well, translates his own poem at a shot into a more beautiful, richer poem! Look at his astounding mistakes in spelling but does it matter?

Sri Aurobindo: No, so long as there is somebody to correct it.

Nirodbaran: And on the whole the metre also seems right.

Sri Aurobindo: What metre? Is it the one I indicated?

Nirodbaran: Amal [47] has corrected the whole thing, he says some of the lines are striking. What would you say and will you kindly retouch, if necessary?

Sri Aurobindo: It is very beautiful. Amal has worked much upon it, so it is so surprisingly perfect. The original form is very poetic, but it is only the first two lines of it and the first two also of the second stanza that are quite successful. All the same it is a remarkable endeavour.

Nirodbaran: Nishikanto says that before writing or painting he bows down once before the Mother and you. If that is the magic, why, I will bow a thousand times, Sir!

Sri Aurobindo: It depends on how you bow. [48]

[8 December 1935]

Nirodbaran: If Nishikanto can learn English metre, he will produce some splendid poems.

Sri Aurobindo: Possibly and probably—only he must learn also what is and is not possible in English poetic style.

Nirodbaran: I hope you didn't fail to notice in Nishikanto's poem—"With profuse success, each pot of my every dot fulfils," word for word a translation by him of his Bengali line—*proti bindur proti adhar*. Amal and I had a hearty laugh!

Sri Aurobindo: Yes, it was a stroke of genius.

Nirodbaran: But don't you agree that it is a very striking piece with much original imagery?

Sri Aurobindo: It is indeed a remarkable effort, full of beauty and power. You will see that by some changes (for the sake of metre and correct language and style) it becomes a poem of great original beauty...

Nirodbaran: I believe than Nishikanto will profit immensely if he tries to learn metre.

Sri Aurobindo: Yes, this one I have turned into a flexible amalgam of iambs, troches and anapaests. It gives to my eye a very attractive and original effect...

Nirodbaran: How do you explain Nishikanto's miraculous feat? He can't speak at all correctly in English, whereas he writes wonderful poetry!

Sri Aurobindo: That has nothing to do with it. Speech and Poetry come from two quite different sources. Remember Goldsmith who wrote like an angel and talked like a parrot.' [49]

[10 December 1935]

Nirodbaran: Here is a lyrical dish prepared by Nishikanto all on a sudden after reading a book on metre. How do you find it?

Sri Aurobindo: For a first attempt remarkable—but he has not yet the necessary niceties of phrase and rhythm. The first three lines of the second stanza are very powerful, as good a thing as any English poet could have written. With some doctoring it makes a powerful lyric.

Nirodbaran: Nishikanto has got the metre all right this time.

Sri Aurobindo: Almost—he has the gift. But there are defects e.g. he sometimes gave 3 ft for 2 ft lines and vice versa. Having made a scheme he should keep to it...' [50]

[11 December 1935]

Nirodbaran: Sending you one more poem by Nishikanto. Seems a very interesting piece. If it could have been done well, it would have been very attractive and original.

Sri Aurobindo: It is indeed a matter of which a fine poem can be made. Nishikanto has imagination and the ideas carry beauty in them, the language also, but he has not yet the knowledge of the turns of the English tongue which make the beauty effective, I have tried to make it as perfect as an hour's work can do—but that is not enough, and it might be better.' [51]

[16 December 1935]

Nirodbaran: Nishikanto has written: "I am tuned in thy tremolo of dreamland, heaven and earth." Is the word tremolo all right?

Sri Aurobindo: It is rather strange but perhaps it will do.

Nirodbaran: The credit of this poem goes entirely to him. You'll be glad to see that your effort at metrical lessons has proved fruitful.

Sri Aurobindo: Evidently with a little care and practice Nishikanto ought soon to be able to handle English metre. He has the gift. [52]

[20 December 1935]

## Paintings

It would be wrong to assume that Nishikanto had stopped painting after becoming an inmate of the Ashram. He did make a number of paintings some of which are still preserved in the Ashram. Two of his greatest paintings *Chandravali* (based on the vision of the Mother he had had before joining the Ashram) and *Bird of Fire* (based on Sri Aurobindo's poem of the same name) adorned the walls of his room. Jayantilal Parekh recalls: "Nishikanto's style also changed when he began doing things here [in Pondicherry]. Just as in his poetry things changed, so too in his paintings. Formerly, he was too wild...his style changed and he did some very interesting work in those days." [53]

The spiritual manifestation has always resulted in the creation and development of art and artistic objects. The style of Nishikanto's painting had evolved with his consciousness. He painted whenever he received the inspiration for doing so. If Sri Aurobindo guided him in his poetic creations, so did the Mother with his paintings and she also had arranged for the exhibition of his paintings (along with Sanjiban, Anilkumar and Jayantilal Parekh) in the Town Hall of Pondicherry in the 1935. The aim was not the mere encouragement of creative activities; on the contrary, it was to develop their inner beings and transform them into the ideal mediums of Art-Consciousness and also the establishment of such consciousness in them.

Nishikanto painted mostly of nature. He used to walk to the Lake and roam around the countryside (Boulevards outer edges) in those days. He drank with his 'seer' eyes all the beauty and come home and transferred it onto the canvas. His paintings were heavy. He painted layer on layer and took a long time over them. They had to be kept on heavy stands. Nirodbaran recalls: "Nishikanta would... sit in half *padmāsana* with his Ganesh-like paunch darkly shining, half discarding the artificial beauty of the worn dhoti and applying the brush with brooding eyes while the glossy jet-black curls were rhythmically swaying like tender infant snakes around his neck." [54]

Nishikanto's paintings had the traits of the mystic elements which grew along with the development of his spiritual consciousness. On the first of every month, Nishikanto used to offer a painting to the Mother. His paintings took a month for completion and even he did not know how the paintings would take shape at the end of the month for he made them solely based on the inspiration he received.

Nishikanto had a unique style of creating his paintings. His creations may resemble modern art and yet they are characterized with the presence of surrealism and metaphysical elements. This was because he drew inspiration from the poetry of Sri Aurobindo and as a result his art took a turn towards symbolism. He also included the experiences of his visions in his paintings. Dhiraj Banerjee writes about his paintings: [55]

Although his colours give an impression of being most probably of modern surrealist type, he was well-trained in the Indian tradition. The lines in his pictures are bold and prominent. The painted parts and or forms are quite clear and distinct; in places they resemble collage a little, and don't always seem to fuse so much one with another as we often see in wash-pictures in general. But neither are they pastiche for that matter. He also did some genre paintings of ordinary scenes, including landscapes in the traditional style...Just like the clean and clear

resonance of his poetic rhythm, the play of colours and the mode of expression in his art is pleasant and eye-catching. He was quite a master of the subject he handled and aware of the technique of composition...

Regarding the progress of Nishikanto the painter, Sri Aurobindo has remarked: "There is progress. It is a very good painting especially from the decoration point of view—a little lacking in charm, but full of strength. He has evidently a great talent." And again: "Nishikanta has already his own developed technique and a certain originality of vision—two things which must be there before a man can take risk as a painter."

Since All Life is Yoga, Sri Aurobindo has reminded: "Any activity can be taken as part of the sadhana if it is offered to the Divine or done with the consciousness or faith that it is done by the Divine Power." [56]

Nishikanto, apart from composing verses, did no work of the Ashram in the early years. Though he wrote from a vital inspiration a time came when the cascade of inspiration was reduced to a thin stream. According to Nirodbaran: "He was now tormented with a spiritual conscience: 'Poetry, painting I have had enough! Where is God? Have I burnt all my works to be caught again in Art's devilish snare?' This was the burden of his pathetic song." [57]

And he adds: "The duel went on and all kinds of inner conflict scoured his outer consciousness. I believe that the Yogic Force after the first years of creative ananda had touched the subconscious, hence the reaction." [58]

During that time the Mother fell ill and Sri Aurobindo discontinued seeing the poems of his disciples. As a result Nishikanto too stopped writing and he argued that if Sri Aurobindo didn't see his poems then what was the use of writing? Sri Aurobindo conveyed to him that the poet "writes out of his own inspiration" and tried to dissuade him but in vain. Nishikanto complained that since the pressure was getting too much it was essential for him to seek relief elsewhere by going out for a while. Sri Aurobindo persuaded him not to do so and advised him to conquer his "vital restlessness" by staying in the Ashram under the aegis of the Gurus. Nirodbaran writes: "...the relief was not found; there was neither peace nor less war. Besides, whenever he tried to meditate on Shiva, Kali or Krishna, the Mother's and Sri Aurobindo's presence used to surround him instead. Realising that the Ashram was his only haven of peace, he came back with a determination that no more art but God alone must be his quest." [59]

Sri Aurobindo too wrote to him reminding him that poetry was not a substitute for sadhana and it can be "an accompaniment only". How? Sri Aurobindo explains to Nishikanto:

If there is a feeling (of devotion, surrender etc.), it can express and confirm it; if there is an experience, it can express or strengthen the force of the experience. As reading of books like the Upanishads or Gita or singing of devotional songs can help, especially at one stage or another, so this can help also. Also it opens a passage between the exterior consciousness and the inner mind or vital. But if one stops at that, then nothing much is gained. Sadhana must be the main thing and sadhana means purification of the nature, the consecration of the being, the opening of the psychic and the inner mind and vital, the contact and presence of the Divine, the realization of the Divine in all things, surrender, devotion, the widening of the consciousness into the cosmic Consciousness, the Self one in all, the psychic and the spiritual transformation of the nature. If these things are neglected and only poetry and mental development and social contacts occupy all the time, then that is not sadhana. Also the poetry must be written in the same spirit, not for fame or self-satisfaction, but as a means of contact with the Divine through aspiration or of the expression of one's own inner being, as it was written formerly by those who left behind them so

much devotional and spiritual poetry in India; it does not help if it is written only in the spirit of the Western artist or littérateur. Even the works or meditation cannot succeed unless they are done in the right spirit of consecration and spiritual aspiration gathering up the whole being and dominating all else. It is the lack of this gathering up of the whole life and nature and turning it towards the one aim, which is the defect in so many here, that lowers the atmosphere and stands in the way of what is being done by myself and the Mother. (19 May 1938) [60]

It was after receiving this explanation from Sri Aurobindo did Nishikanto decide to take up some work in the Ashram so he joined the Dining Room as a chef. He realized that since the job of a chef would be strenuous it would calm down the restlessness of his vital being. He repeated his success as a chef and received Sri Aurobindo's praise: "His cooking is excellent." (Years later when Sri Aurobindo had stopped eating sweets, Nirodbaran had taken to him two plateful of rasogollas [the famous sweetmeat of Bengal] prepared by Nishikanto. Sri Aurobindo took a bite and realized what a delightful preparation it was. He said: "Nishikanto has prepared it. I must take one more, there will be no harm." When he was helping himself with the second rasogolla, the Mother entered his room and having a look at the sweetmeats she instructed Nirodbaran to take them away as they were harmful for Sri Aurobindo's health. [61]

Nishikanto's cooking earned the praise of all the inmates which in turn increased their appetite. He divided his time among his cooking and creative pursuits. In the morning he devoted him time to the Dining Room; in the afternoon he prepared cheese, cakes, biscuits, rasogollas and other sweets; the evening and night were devoted to painting and verse-composition respectively. As a chef, he was assisted by many sadhikas of the Ashram; sharing his gourmet with others, he called himself (after the then Viceroy): "Lord Kitchener, with many Lady Kitcheners." Since his house was just across the street from the Dining Room, whenever anyone asked him where he resided, he would reply: "Khyber Pass", which in Bengali means "just across the kitchen." During one of the Darshan days Nishikanto was busy working in the Dining Room. So engrossed was he in his work that he lost the sense of time till someone reminded him that the Darshan would end soon. He realized that it was too late to procure flowers for Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. So what to do? He looked around and saw a vessel full of red, ripe tomatoes. He took the best one from it and offered it to his Gurus as a flower.

But Nishikanto's culinary skills brought him the physical suffering he was destined to suffer from. One day he thought of preparing some vinegar. He collected a lot of raw mangoes and prepared vinegar; he wanted to test its concentration, therefore, he drank two cups of the sharp liquid. As a result he developed ulcers in his stomach. Diabetes followed the ulcers due to his habit of overeating and then came high blood pressure followed by tuberculosis. Thus started the Asuric invasion in his body in the form of illnesses which was to grow in due course of time. Long ago Nirodbaran had warned him that the excessive strain he undertook for his artistic activities and irregularities in having his meals might lead him to diabetes but the poet didn't listen to the doctor. As a result of his illness, Nishikanto had to leave his job at the Dining Room. He realized how true Sri Aurobindo's prophecy was regarding the physical suffering his body would be subjected to.

### **Sri Aurobindo's concern about Nishikanto's health**

Nishikanto's illnesses couldn't take away his indomitable spirit. His occasional pranks and humour were enjoyed even by Sri Aurobindo who would remark with a smile: "What a fellow!" On one occasion when his condition deteriorated to a great extent Sri Aurobindo was informed and he said: "Let him stick anyhow." Nirodbaran conveyed to Nishikanto: "Well, Kavi [meaning, the poet as he was addressed by all], Guru has given you unchartered freedom. No need of bothering about Yoga. Just stick anyhow." From time to time Sri Aurobindo would also

inquire about Nishikanto's health. In his *Twelve Years with Sri Aurobindo*, Nirodbaran writes: "One day, after [Sri Aurobindo's] concentration, I remember him saying, apropos of nothing, 'I was seeing how Nishikanto was.' At that time Nishikanto was not keeping well." [62]

The following excerpts reveal how Nishikanto's health was discussed in the talks Sri Aurobindo used to have with his attendants:

Nirodbaran: Nishikanto is having his old trouble—pain, vomiting, etc.

Sri Aurobindo: Has he been eating anything?

Nirodbaran: I don't think so. No resources.

Sri Aurobindo: No resources?

Nirodbaran: No pocket money, but he took some sweets which people had brought during the Darshan period.

Sri Aurobindo: Ah, I thought so.

Nirodbaran: But they were nothing much—

Sri Aurobindo: Nothing much?

Nirodbaran: I mean, not so much in quantity—about three or four, he said.

Sri Aurobindo: How was he cured last time?

Nirodbaran: By your Force, he says.

Sri Aurobindo: And now he is brought back to his old condition by his own force? [63]

[1 March 1940]

Nirodbaran: Nishikanto has passed a distressing night. He says that whatever little faith and devotion he had has left him. Now the physical also, with which he wanted to serve the Divine, is out of gear. So he is getting depressed.

Sri Aurobindo: Why depression? The thing is to get cured.

Nirodbaran: He doesn't believe he will be cured. He was thinking he would go where his eyes took him.

Sri Aurobindo: ...But what is his complaint at present?

Nirodbaran: Pain. Pain is constant though he doesn't feel it. (Laughter)

Sri Aurobindo: How is that? If he doesn't feel it, how can there be pain?

Nirodbaran: I don't understand either. He says that with any jerk the pain comes.

Sri Aurobindo: Oh, he means that. But one can get spiritual experiences in illness too. The illness doesn't stand in the way of getting spiritual experiences...

Nirodbaran: ...Nishikanto has lost faith. His faith comes with a cure and goes with an illness. (*laughter*) [64]

[8 March 1940]

Nirodbaran: Yesterday Nishikanto gave a triplet banana to show to the Mother and asked if he could take it. The Mother laughed and inquired, "Is he starving? He can take it with milk after mashing it sufficiently." This morning he said he couldn't take the whole. Even then there was some heaviness. I said I would report it to you.

Satyendra: But why does he want to attract Sri Aurobindo's notice? To have pity on him because he can't take even a banana? (*laughter*)

Sri Aurobindo: He seems to be forced into yogic austerity! (*laughter*)

Nirodbaran: The vision he had some time back seems to have come true. Once during his sleep he saw a vital being pointing to his abdomen and saying, "That is the source of your strength. I am going to finish it." Then the being struck at the pit of his stomach like a bull with his head down. Nishikanto groaned and retaliated by suddenly giving a sharp squeeze to the being's scrotum. At this the being fled. (*laughter*)

Sri Aurobindo: The being appears to have been right about Nishikanto. The pit of the stomach is the vital-emotional centre, which is the source of the strength. But it would be interesting to know what happened to the scrotum of the vital being. (*laughter*) [65]

[4 April 1940]

A little known fact: For some time Nishikanto had taught Bengali in the Ashram School; though he was extremely popular among the students for his wit he was never popular for his teaching. Prithwindranath Mukherjee recalls in his memoirs: "When Nishikanto came to teach us *Meghnadbad Kavya* [*The Slaying of Meghnad* by Michael Madhusudan Dutta] I felt sad when I observed that such a witty and learned person became extremely dull as a teacher." [66]

### **An interesting personality**

Yet Nishikanto remained an interesting personality in the eyes of the younger generation of the Ashramites though 'not an inspiring figure to behold' as confessed by R Prabhakar who also reminisces: "I knew Kobi from the early days i.e. 1945-46, just as an elder, who was a friend of my uncle [Roopnagunta Subramanyam Pantulu]. He dropped in, at our house, when invited for lunch on some special occasions... They got along well. To my aunt he was just 'Nidra Moham'—sleepy face—because of his dreamy eyes. What interested us children was his eating. He ate with deep-felt-delight. Once he was served hot vadas... on his banana leaf. He liked them well as they slipped down his gullet. Thinking of reliving the experience later he quietly slipped some into his kurta pocket. My sharp-eyed uncle caught him in the act and, 'Hey, you fool, they are oily. They will ruin your kurta.' Kobi smiled sheepishly and reluctantly stopped filling his pocket. My aunt brought him a can to fill and take home. He was so glad." And he adds: "He had, as most of us do, several photos of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo in his room. But, unlike most of us, one of the Mother's photos was always smudged with a patch of oil. It was called 'Mecho Ma'—Mother of Fish. The oil patch was from his well-oiled hair, where his head

touched in pranam as he prayed to her: 'May good and big fish be caught today. I am going to the market to buy some.' ” [67]

### **Some compositions**

15 August 1947 marked the seventy-fifth birth anniversary of Sri Aurobindo as well as the birth of a free but divided India. Nishikanto penned seventy-five sonnets and published them in a collection titled *Vaijayanti*. These sonnets weren't purely mystic in nature but conveyed the hard realities the country had to undergo. These poems and also the ones published in his *Vande Mataram* (especially *Black Blood*) two years later were the poet's expression of sorrow and anger regarding the state of the nation and the communal incidents that took place. The pain and sorrow of a poet on seeing his motherland is reflected in the poems. He cries out:

I want the undivided country, I want Integral India.

Whose soil enshrines the idol of the Eternal Mother

In this earth-temple; whose snow-capped mountains

Embody the sky high, unshakeable, great and vast ideal;

Whose Jahnvi of affection pours in an undisturbed clear stream

The ambrosia of Mother-Consciousness into the heart

Of all humanity; whose mud blossoms the lotus of life

To end the darkness of the world; in whose lap

All the fragments of limitation disappear

With the advent of the Unlimited; here the heroic revolutionary

Annihilates the rakshasa sucking blood

From the breast of the mother-country, and realises

The Universal Mother; here the earth becomes the fire-chariot

For the descended Rudrani in the victory celebration of her children

In their battle against the asuras, the land where the Mahashakti treads;

I want that land, I want Integral India. [68]

On 5 December 1950 Sri Aurobindo left his body. His unexpected departure came as a bolt-from-the blue to all of his disciples and followers and Nishikanto was shocked beyond imagination. Gone was the one whom he had addressed:

The earth is holy ground since thou art born

And walk'st her clay.

At thy angel tread a new-lit sun at morn  
Wakes every day.  
All pathways at thy footfall break to flowers  
Of harmony  
And the winds repeat thy hallowed name for hours  
In ecstasy.  
The evening-star met in thy eyes of flame  
Her love's own fire,  
And greeting thee the silent moon became  
Transformed to a lyre.  
Rainbows descend below, thy robes to dye,  
O ageless Glean!  
A-heave with hue and vision the poets cry:

“Come true, our Dream!” [69]

But he could understand the reason for the departure of his Guru and his pen gave birth to thirty poems which were published in 1951 under the title of *Nabodipan*. When Sri Aurobindo was being lowered into the Samadhi on 9 December, a spontaneous prayer rose from Nishikanto's heart: “Now that you have gone physically, assure us that your work will be done.” “Something made him look up at the Service Tree and suddenly he saw against it Sri Aurobindo; his undraped upper body was of a golden colour. He said firmly with great energy and power in Bengali, ‘Habe, habe, habe’ — ‘It will be done, it will be done, it will be done.’ ” [70]

Let's not forget what Nishikanto had sung of him:

India's sacrificial fire  
In your high self has found its shrine:  
The tranquil brow of the universe  
Implores your signature divine.  
Earth's fuel of blood upflamed in you  
Nevermore to be quenched again  
And its light soared higher day by day

Which the Gods from out of the blue sustain.

In this dim land you came to pave

The swift white path to liberty

And the world its freedom shall attain

And kiss your feet in ecstasy.

The past dawns never trammelled your feet

Nor halted your march to the Future's noon,

And the whirl of Shiva's delivering dance

Its rhythm imparts to you alone.

Dauntless breaker of outworn moulds!

You slay the night like a sword of morn:

To burn tradition's mountain-walls

A sun-blaze, you, to us were born:

An emblem of the heavenly dare,

A wielder of thunder none could tame:

The darkling maws of Fate's abysm

Were closed in fear when you, Lord, came.

O ocean of love, life's radiant flood!

How shall Time's prison encincture you

To whom the cell was a trysting-place,

Where Krishna came your soul to woo!

Through Time you won to Timelessness

And temples flashed where dungeons fell

And there outwelled heart's hymns as you

Quelled aeoned glooms of tyrant Hell.

Hark, conchs are loud and light's in spate

Behold, upon our soil of pain  
The King of Kings descends at last  
With Krishna's Grace His Light to attain.

O Leader of India, now hailed  
By the world as its Teacher, to your feet  
We bow as the stars, lo, sing a thrill  
Their anthem your high soul to greet! [71]

With Sri Aurobindo's passing into the Beyond all eyes now turned towards the Mother for the completion of the Yoga of Transformation and manifestation of the Supermind. In Nishikanto's words, she was:

O quintessential Fire of the universe,  
Primeval Queen, whose youth no ravage mars,  
Vicegerent of Lord Shiva! thou rainest still  
All boons—faith, courage, power invincible  
And yet remain'st ethereal, robed by skies:  
At thy flower-like feet the Soul, in homage, lies.  
A young sun-glint upon earth's ancient brow,  
Thou heraldest a New Dawn's tender glow:  
Life's avenues with new blooms flare apace  
Where birds sing in a new sky-consciousness.  
Thou bring'st to deserts sylvan harmonies:  
At thy flower-like feet the Soul, in homage, lies.  
Colonies of an unglimped loveliness  
Are gifts to earth of thy imperial Grace.  
By thee inspired, surrendering our all  
We win thy lustre's endless carnival.  
O Light that sees and Flame that purifies,

At thy flower-like feet the Soul, in homage, lies. [72]

### **A mobile hospital**

By 1955 Nishikanto's body had become a mobile hospital; he was already suffering from tuberculosis, high blood pressure, stomach ulcer, acute diabetes ("ants would swarm to wherever a drop of his urine chanced to fall. His night-pot had to be islanded by a ring of DDT" [73]) and he had also suffered a heart attack. And in 1955 he was diagnosed with an abscess in his lungs. "The very source of his unbounded energy was in peril," remarks Nirodbaran. [74] The doctors, despite being witness to his earlier miraculous recoveries, were sceptical about his survival this time. Operation was the only solution but the condition of his health was so bad that it was doubted whether he would be able to bear the strain of it. But Nishikanto had little faith in the medicines and more on the blessings of the Mother so even in such debilitated condition he continued to go for the Balcony Darshan of the Mother with a stick and also went out for an evening walk and visited the Playground to receive the Mother's blessings. Even wind and rain couldn't deter him from going for the Darshan of the Mother. Sometimes he would visit Tinkori Banerjee, the composer who, after Dilip Kumar left the Ashram in 1953, used to set tunes to his lyrics. According to him:

Liberation or truce I do not seek of You, O Mother!

I seek of You my glorious bondage as Your prisoner.

Enchain the monster of my impatient life-force

In a thousand twists, and at its very source

Squeeze out my ego's vim in Your iron grip, O Mother!

Forgiveness, affection, love I do not seek of You, O Mother!

Drain out my teeming wants, my bartering hopes shatter.

Hurl back my dark demands' tumultuous roll,

Burn up the brutal core of my desire-soul,

Place me under Your feet as Your slave, free in surrender.

Victory or boon or refuge I do not seek of You, O Mother!

Crush my rebel selfhood with the victor's gracious power.

To live in the beauty of Your divine terror

In total submission I give my whole world of error.

Batter my crown to fashion Your anklets of jingling wonder. [75]

To take care of Nishikanto's health his sister Aparna came to Pondicherry and settled in the Ashram; she looked after him till his last breath. "Some of us boys were called in for the nights. We talked deep into the night. He told us tales, tall ones and true ones. He told of his escapades,

hilarious encounters with other men, ghosts and doctors—often heavily spiced with unmentionable comments. He could bowl us, young men, over our own ‘home-ground’ (of speech and thought). He did not modulate his voice, raise it in excitement, no gesticulating—nothing. All would flow, slow and steady in a husky monotonous drone! Yet he held us captivated, as he did all who came into contact with him. He held us, but himself, eluded us. His sister protested, saying, ‘The doctor has forbidden so much talking.’ He replied, ‘...What does the doctor know? I am talking with my group boys,’ and continued.” [76]

### **The day of glorious destiny**

One day as Nishikanto was about to leave his house in the morning with his stick, he suddenly felt that his legs had lost all sensation and he almost fell down. He returned to his room and took to bed. When Nirodbaran, whom he had sent for, came to see him, Nishikanto said: “I have so long managed to carry the body’s burden; now the limbs are half-dead, the mind is more so for fear of losing the Mother’s Darshan. ... If the blessings are stopped, what’s the use of life? I have sent for you to tell the Mother that I may not be deprived of her Darshan... I am not upset, neither am I sorry to die. How often have I wanted to discard this rotten frame and come back as a frolicking child in the Green Group! But to live like a dummy without the Mother’s touch—to that I will never agree.” Nirodbaran assured him that the numbness, which was due to diabetes, was temporary in nature and it would pass away. When the Mother was informed about Nishikanto’s illness and his prayer to her, she told Nirodbaran that Nishikanto had informed her that the insulin was doing him great harm so the insulin should be ceased at once. Meanwhile Nishikanto’s condition began to deteriorate further. He had lost his faith in the efficacy of medicines long ago. Fever, pain in joints and hourly urination continued to trouble him and gradually his condition began to drift towards a coma but he kept alive the hope of seeing the Mother.

Nirodbaran was deeply perturbed by Nishikanto’s failing health. One day Champaklal suggested to him that a certain doctor be consulted for Nishikanto, instead of the one who was treating him as the former “carries a silent force with him”. On the following day when Nirodbaran went to visit Nishikanto, he observed that the early signs of uremia were beginning to show in him. Nishikanto requested Nirodbaran to take him to the Playground as he wanted to bow down at the Mother’s feet. When the Mother was informed about Nishikanto’s request, she refused to meet him till 24 April and told Nirodbaran: “Listen, one year ago he wrote to me a letter in which he prayed that I must keep him alive till April 24th, that is three days more from now. And I gave him my word. You know how the whole of last year has been for him a series of upheavals and storms. Like a sentinel star, I kept my watch over him and never relaxed a moment in my protecting power. The last attack was the abscess. That too was healing up; but when on his last birthday he came for my blessings, I saw that something had gone wrong, there was a fissure in his faith and this dangerous attack has come upon that psychological trouble. You will tell him I want to see him on the 24th. Gathering all his strength, he must come on that solemn occasion.” [77]

At the same time the Mother asked Nirodbaran to approach the same doctor whose name Champaklal had referred to. When the doctor was approached he immediately started his “gigantic treatment”. Champaklal also visited Nishikanto and assured him that he would be all right.

At last the “day of destiny dawned”. On 24 April 1956 in the morning, Nishikanto was given a sponge-bath. Volunteers came with a stretcher to take him to the Meditation Hall for the Mother’s Darshan. The Mother too had sent word that she would come down in the Meditation Hall after the Darshan and at that time no one should be present near about. At 10:30 in the

morning Nishikanto was taken to the Meditation Hall by the volunteers. The Mother came downstairs. The stretcher was raised knee-high so that the Mother could bless him. He stretched out his feeble hands which the Mother “clutched and drew them into her own and silently smiled into his wide open supplicating eyes”. Suddenly Nishikanto, pointing to his chest, said: “Mother, your foot here.” The stretcher was put down and the Mother placed her right foot over his heart and Nishikanto pressed it with his eager hands. In the evening when Nirodbaran went to see Nishikanto, he could notice that the feverish restlessness was no longer present in him; on being asked how he felt, Nishikanto replied: “The hell-fire within has subsided.” When asked how he felt when the Mother had placed her foot on his chest, he said: “Ah, the relief! the body seemed to have become ice-cold. Every cell was soothed with peace and peace.” [78]

### **The recovery**

From that day onwards Nishikanto began to recover. In his own words:

Today my expectations will not be satiated with a little,

I care for the aeons and further;

My love demands a plenty,

I am Thy ever-green versifier.

I hanker for Thy love eternal,

Will not accept the bonds mortal,

I shall draw Thy everlasting figure...

Today is my birthday, O Mother!

And I have come to Thee.

Keep me in Thy lap today,

Today You envelop me.

Today You have made me reborn

Kissing the cheeks of my life anon,

Rejuvenation rings in the blood in me...

The birth from the human-mother is over

With Supramental-Mother's kiss;

The eyes blaze with a new sight

In body and mind new consciousness' bliss.

I see this world and life anew

Having a message from another world drew  
In the appearance of a new light in the earthly abyss...  
What shall I give Thee as birthday-offering?  
This birth given by Thee be my offering made.  
Which way wilt Thou take me? Oh take,  
I take refuge in Thy tread;  
In Thy lap of profound fathomlessness  
In the swing of Thy advent's blazing boundlessness  
My entire being in surrender laid. [79]

Years rolled by. Nishikanto continued to move on with his life and poetry though the torrential downpour of inspiration had slowed down. As a result, after the publication of his book *Nabodipanin* 1951 there was no further publication of his works till 1973 when his *Lilayan* and *Shikha-satadal* were published posthumously. However he stopped painting; when R Prabhakar asked him: "Why don't you paint? You are not too well and can't roam around. You have time on your hands. I will help you gather the materials", he replied: "No more...It takes a great amount of concentration, thus energy, and I have not much energy." [80] Though he could embrace the beauty of Nature but he no longer could reproduce them on the canvas.

R Prabhakar shares his reminiscences about Nishikanto: "He was inducted into our group (now 'group D', at that time 'group C') sometime in the late fifties—for his abilities as a cook...Our group went to the Lake for a daylong picnic... Kobi was taken along. He naturally took charge of the kitchen. Breakfast was simple and frugal—a round bun with condensed milk or butter and tea. Tea was made in a big—very big brass vessel. Some miscalculation—and quite a quantity was left over. It would be a pity pouring it to the plants—what to do? A problem?— Not with Kobi around. He just cooked the 'Dal' [pulses] for lunch in it." [81]

Nishikanto used to attend the Mother's distribution of ground-nuts in the Playground with the other inmates of the Ashram. The Mother walked in front of the lined groups and with a wooden ladle gave the ground-nuts into the cupped hands of the inmates. They had to tell her "plein", "moitié" or "très peu" (meaning full, half and very little, respectively) and she would give them accordingly. Nishikanto, due to ill-health, was given only "très peu" everyday. But he wanted more so he thought of a noble procedure; he stitched himself a bag from the sleeve of his Kurta and contacted some sympathetic children and told them to ask for "plein" everyday. He then stood with his bag at a pre-arranged spot and his suppliers would drop in it the ground-nuts they got from the Mother. Some time later when the Mother came to know about it, she put an end to it. Nishikanto composed a couplet following the prohibition: "Playground er Madam/ Aar dayna badam" (The Madam of Playground no longer gives ground-nuts.) Another day in the Playground chocolates were to be distributed by the Mother. Since the Mother was in hurry that day the inmates formed two parallel rows facing each other and the Mother walked in between giving away alternately left then right. Nishikanto, who was diabetic and not allowed to have sweets, asked two boys to close up and stood a step behind stretching out his joined palms through the gap between the two boys to elude the divine detection. The Mother, neither looking left or right with her gaze turned down, began to place the chocolate on the palms of the inmates.

When she was about to place a chocolate on the disembodied outstretched hands of Nishikanto, she suddenly stopped and looked up and saw Nishikanto. In a desperate tone, he said: “Mother, Mother, I will take it in milk.” The Mother broke into a beatific smile and placed the chocolate in his hands. [82]

In 1960 Nishikanto had a relapse of tuberculosis and once again his condition turned critical. A year earlier he had said: “No more death-days, henceforth only birthdays,” [83] but it seemed that he had spoken a bit too soon. His condition deteriorated and the Mother felt that it was necessary to shift him to some hospital. Like a very obedient child he went to the hospital where he became immensely popular among the nurses. He would compose poems on them in English, Hindi and Tamil; one of such poems still remains unforgotten: “Our sister Mathews still moving with virginal splendour/ Like a beautiful goose without a gander.” [84] But at times when his condition grew bad he expressed his desire to leave his body and come back in the body of a new-born. R Prabhakar remembers: “He used to say, ‘...I am going to die, but I will come back here. Do find me a nice, young healthy couple who can bring me forth here.’ Suggestions were given... ‘Look out’, he said, ‘for a boy with big eyes and a penchant for sweets.’ ” [85]

### **Never afraid of death**

During one of his illnesses he was admitted to JIPMER and Darshan was a few days away. Nishikanto was desirous to have the Mother’s Darshan but the doctor refused. When all persuasion failed, Nishikanto said to the doctor: “You sit in the car with me and hold my wrist, feel the pulse. We start for the Ashram. If you feel any deterioration (in the pulse) we turn around and back to bed. But, if no change, then we both have the Darshan of Mother.” R Prabhakar remarks: “The doctor gave in to this simple, strange solution to the impasse. He probably thought it an easy way out—he was in for a surprise. The car was brought and off they went, a strange duo—a smiling sick man and an anxious doctor, holding hands it seemed. As the car approached the Ashram, Kobi’s smile grew broader, the doctor’s eyes wider, amazed. The pulse got better and better. The Mother appeared and both had Darshan.” [86] However, in spite of his numerous ailments Nishikanto was never afraid of death. When he was asked once: “How do you feel with Death standing at your door-step?” pat came his reply: “Why don’t you ask Death how he feels standing in front of me!” And whenever he would recover, he would tell R Prabhakar: “...Yama [the God of Death] took me, had one look and said what to do with this wreck and returned me.” [87] During his last illness, a sadhak had remarked: “Oh, Nishikanto! He has been dying for the last thirty years.”

In January 1970 Dilip Kumar wrote to Nishikanto from his Ashram in Pune and sent two poems of his along with his photograph. That was the first communication between the two friends since Dilip Kumar’s departure from the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in 1953. Nishikanto replied to him on 22 January (Dilip Kumar’s 73rd birthday) and reminisced the good old days of their association; he also expressed his desire to meet Dilip Kumar and requested him to pay a visit to the Ashram. In another letter written on 4 September 1972 he informed Dilip Kumar about a musical soiree that had been organized in the Ashram Theatre on 29 October where three songs of Nishikanto set to tune by Dilip Kumar were sung by the Ashram students under the supervision of Sahana Devi. (When asked how did he like the songs, Nishikanto replied: “Quite nice but it would have nicer if I had not remembered the voice of Dilip Kumar who had sung these songs to me. His voice is unforgettable.”) In the same letter he thanked Dilip Kumar for singing his song on Sri Aurobindo on Pune Radio and also conveyed to him that Anilbaran [Roy]’s granddaughter had thanked Dilip Kumar for singing the former’s song *In lotus-groves Thy spirit roves: where shall I find a seat for Thee?* (Translated by Sri Aurobindo)

In the early 1970s, Nishikanto met with a motor accident while on his visit to one of the Ashram farms. His spine was badly injured; when the doctor came to him, he narrated in flawless Tamil what exactly had happened. When the doctor asked where did he learn Tamil so well, he replied: "In the fish market." Every year just two or three days before the Darshan he would fall ill. He was desirous to see the Birth Centenary celebrations of Sri Aurobindo in 1972 but doubted whether he would be able to survive; however he did witness the centenary celebrations of his Guru, though on that day (15 August 1972) just half an hour prior to the Balcony Darshan of the Mother he had suffered a heart attack. He had her Darshan from an open window of the Ashram Dispensary and then he was taken to bed where he remained confined for the next three months. During the Darshan of 24 November 1972, just an hour before the Mother appeared on the Balcony, he suffered another heart attack. His body, which had been subjected to a number of diseases but stood victorious in the end, had lost its strength to fight; though the ulcers in his stomach which were his companions for thirty long years and the tuberculosis which troubled him for ten years were healed but the continuous bleeding from his wounds had made his heart extremely weak. But even in such physical conditions he would say: "Mother, I came here to surrender to you but it seems I would have to surrender to the doctors."

In 1972 Nishikanto had the Darshan of Vasudeva and it prompted him to pen his last work *Lilayan* which consisted of a thousand lines. Not only can it be called a ballad but also a 'devotional idyll on Krishna.' Dhiraj Banerjee writes about *Lilayan*: "It consists of a series of poems written in the same tone and manner, further linked by one common refrain in all. Therefore they are bunched together... The poems, meant to be recited or sung, are written supposedly in the 'Kirtan' style. They are mainly eulogies on Sri Krishna. But the writer also extols other great souls, like Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Aurobindo, Sri Vivekananda, Sri Gourango, etc... In Nishikanto's poems Krishna is not shown as a mythical god but as a real being... For himself it was a fulfilment devoutly to be wished. One could plausibly say that it is his 'envoy'." [88]

Now that he had seen the Birth Centenary of Sri Aurobindo, Nishikanto longed to witness the Mother's Birth Centenary as well but he felt that his end was near so he would tell his admirers: "I would see the Birth Centenary celebrations of the Mother in the form of a bird sitting on the Service Tree."

On 2 May 1973 Nishikanto wrote his last letter to Dilip Kumar giving him the permission to record his song He's caught, the Elusive on the gramophone and expressed his happiness on the fact that the sale proceeds of the records would go to Ramakrishna Mission.

### **The last sunset**

20 May 1973. Nishikanto was lying on his bed and looking at the sun setting in the west. When Aparna asked him how he was feeling, he replied: "The exterior consciousness is becoming hazy but the inner consciousness is fine." Little did Aparna realize that it would be the last sunset Nishikanto would witness. As the night approached Aparna saw Nishikanto looking for something; on her enquiry he asked whether the blessing-packet of the Mother was in his pocket. "Yes, it is," and Aparna placed his hand on the pocket to indicate the location. A lovely smile appeared on his face. It was the smile of the final farewell. Then he began to have some breathing problem and the doctor and the others who were in his room tried to ease his suffering by giving him oxygen. Feeling better he told R Prabhakar to go and have his dinner and then come back. To Nirodbaran, he said that his end was near so he can now write whatever he wanted on him. Precisely at 10 pm Nishikanto breathed his last. The "Brahmaputra of Inspiration" and the 'Moon-Poet' was gone "to lay himself down again under the Mother's feet—to a greater awakening". [89] In his own words:

I have shattered the hard rocky prison  
Like a spring my spirit has risen  
And flooded the desert horizon;  
My life illumines the death-dark night of time and space. [90]  
And hence  
Sleep, sleep, O my bird, in your glorious nest  
Like a pearl in the deep's delight,  
Like a star of the sky in its radiant rest,  
Like a flower on a timeless height. [91]  
So  
Like lightning among the blind foldings of cloudy time;  
The delivered consciousness of the imprisoned thirst for light  
Brimms now with song of celestial streams, the joyous chime  
Glowes with an inner moon-rise melody, gold and white,  
Drenching the desert-dark of the world; O Immortal lore  
Of mortal birth, like the bright-winged bird with you I soar. [92]

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[1] Nishikanto, *Bonne Fête (Janmadin)* translated by Satadal, pp. 1-2

[2] Sagarmoy Ghosh was the younger brother of Santidev Ghosh, the renowned exponent of Rabindrasangeet (the songs of Tagore) and he was the editor of *Desh*, the oldest literary magazine of Bengal for almost six decades.

[3] *Nishikanto: The Mystic Poet and Artist, Mother India*, p. 128

[4] Buddhadev Basu (30 November 1908—18 March 1974) was a poet, novelist, dramatist and literary critic of Bengal. He was awarded the Sahitya Academy Award in 1967 and Padmabhushan in 1970

[5] Dilip Kumar Roy and Indira Devi, *Pilgrims of the Stars*, pp. 80-81

[6] *Selected Essays and Talks of Nirodbaran*, pp. 169-170

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 169

- [8] *Ibid.*
- [9] Nishikanto, *Bonne Fête*, p. 13
- [10] Dhiraj Banerjee, *Nishikanto: The Mystic Poet and Artist, Mother India*, February 1994, p. 126
- [11] For a detailed record of this conversation refer to Dilip Kumar Roy's *Sadhu Gurudayal and Kavi Nishikanto* (in Bengali)
- [12] *Selected Essays and Talks of Nirodbaran*, p. 170
- [13] R. Prabhakar, *Among the Not So Great*, p. 29
- [14] Nishikanto, *Dream Cadences*, p. 54 (translated from the original by Dilip Kumar Roy)
- [15] *Selected Essays and Talks of Nirodbaran*, p. 171
- [16] Abani Sinha, *My Last Two Darshans of Sri Aurobindo, Mother India*, September 1994, p. 641
- [17] *Bonne Fête*, p. 6
- [18] *Bonne Fête*, pp. 8-11
- [19] Dalia Sarkar, *Kobi Nishikanto*, p. 84
- [20] *Selected Essays and Talks by Nirodbaran*, pp. 171-172
- [21] *Nishikanto: The Mystic Poet and Artist*, p. 127
- [22] *Ibid.*, p. 128
- [23] *Dream Cadences*, pp. 3-5 (Translated by Dilip Kumar Roy)
- [24] *Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library*, Volume 5, pp. 614-615
- [25] *Dream Cadences*, p. 46 (Translated by Dilip Kumar Roy)
- [26] Dhiraj Banerjee, *Nishikanto: The Mystic Poet and Artist, Mother India*, April 1994, pp. 274-276
- [27] *Ibid.*, pp. 277-278
- [28] *Dream Cadences*, p. 12
- [29] *Ibid.*, p. 7
- [30] *Nishikanto: The Mystic Poet and Artist*, p. 182
- [31] *Nirodbaran, Talks with Sri Aurobindo, Volume I*, pp. 336-337

- [32] *Ibid.*, pp. 363-364
- [33] *Ibid.*, pp. 372-374
- [34] *Ibid.*, pp. 376-377
- [35] *Ibid.*, pp. 386-387
- [36] Nirodbaran, *Talks with Sri Aurobindo, Volume II*, pp. 575-576
- [37] *Ibid.*, pp. 579-581
- [38] *Ibid.*, p. 584
- [39] *Ibid.*, p. 841
- [40] *Ibid.*, pp. 844-845
- [41] R. Prabhakar, *Among the Not So Great*, p. 27
- [42] Shyam Kumari, *Vignettes of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother*, pp. 20-21
- [43] *Srinvantu*, Golden Jubilee Collection (Bengali), pp. 257-259
- [44] *Dream Cadences*, p. 1
- [45] Recounted to the author by Nirmal Singh Nahar.
- [46] *Nishikanto: The Mystic Poet and Artist*, *Mother India*, February 1994, p. 127
- [47] Amal Kiran, the name given by Sri Aurobindo to KD Sethna
- [48] *Mother India*, February 1982, pp. 91-92
- [49] *Ibid.*, pp. 92-94
- [50] *Ibid.*, p. 95-96
- [51] *Mother India*, March 1982, p. 162
- [52] *Ibid.*, p. 164
- [53] *Two Interviews with Jayantilal Parekh*, *Mother India*, February 2005, pp. 192-193
- [54] *Selected Essays and Talks of Nirodbaran*, p. 174
- [55] *Nishikanto: The Mystic Poet and Artist*, *Mother India*, May 1994, pp. 355-356
- [56] Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Poetry and Art*, p. 711
- [57] *Selected Essays and Talks of Nirodbaran*, p. 175

- [58] *Ibid.*, pp. 175-176
- [59] *id.*, p. 176
- [60] Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Poetry and Art*, pp. 711-712
- [61] *Kobi Nishikanto*, p. 118
- [62] Nirodbaran, *Twelve Years with Sri Aurobindo*, p. 46
- [63] Nirodbaran, *Talks with Sri Aurobindo, Volume II*, p. 518-519
- [64] *Ibid.*, p. 538
- [65] *Ibid.*, p. 588
- [66] Prithwindranath Mukherjee, *Pondicherry er Dingulo*, p. 39
- [67] R. Prabhakar, *Among the Not So Great*, p. 29-30
- [68] *Bonne Fête*, p. 29-30
- [69] *Dream Cadences*, p. 2
- [70] Nirodbaran, *Twelve Years with Sri Aurobindo*, pp. 282-283
- [71] Translated by Dilip Kumar Roy (see *Hark! His Flute!* pp. 122-123
- [72] *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5
- [73] *Among the Not So Great*, p. 35
- [74] *Selected Essays and Talks of Nirodbaran*, p. 177
- [75] *Slave* (translated by Robi Das), *Mother India*, April 1978, p. 275
- [76] *Among the Not So Great*, pp. 33-34
- [77] *Selected Essays and Talks of Nirodbaran*, p. 183
- [78] *Ibid.*, p. 186
- [79] *Bonne Fête*, pp. 21-27
- [80] *Among the Not So Great*, p. 33
- [81] *Ibid.*, p. 30
- [82] *Ibid.*, pp. 31-32
- [83] *Selected Essays and Talks of Nirodbaran*, p. 186

[84] *Kobi Nishikanto*, p. 149

[85] *Among the Not So Great*, p. 37

[86] *Ibid.*, p. 36

[87] *Ibid.*

[89] *Among the Not So Great*, p. 37

[88] *Nishikanto: The Mystic Poet and Artist*, pp. 354-355

[90] *Dream Cadences*, p. 19

[91] *Ibid.*, p. 10

[92] *Ibid.*, p. 27