Chapter II

Suniti Kumar Chatterji’s Early Life and Training

Chatterji’s Family and Childhood: Suniti Kumar Chatterji, son of Babu Haridas Chatterji and Katyayani Devi, was born at Shibpur, a village on the Western bank of Ganges on November 26, 1890. He was the second of the four sons and two daughters of his parents. His elder brother was Anadikrishna and the younger ones were Sujoyinath and Basantikumar. The sisters were Jibonchandi and Jibontara.

Chatterji’s great grandfather Bhairab Chatterji, who was a ‘Kulin’ brahmin of a middle class family, had come away from Pangsha village, his ancestral home in Faridpur district of East Bengal, now in Bangladesh and was living in Khanakul – Krishnanagar area of Hoogly district. Chatterji’s grandfather Ishwar Chandra served the East India Company during Sepoy Mutiny and after his retirement he built a one storied house at Sukias Street in Simulia-Chaltabagan area of North Central Calcutta. He shifted from Hoogly district and settled here. Suniti Kumar spent forty-three years of his life in his house. Babu Haridas Chatterji worked as a clerk in Turner Morrison and Company for more than forty years and when he retired the Company honored him with a pension of Rs. 150 per month which was unimaginable in those days.

The Chatterji family, with Suniti Kumar and five other children, their parents and aged grand parents, was quite a large one. But the family income was not sufficient for them. So, Chatterji’s childhood days were marked by
poverty and hardships. When the boy was twelve he lost his mother. But he was fortunate to enjoy the company of his father who lived till the age of eighty-four year. Suniti Kumar also had his loving grandfather and grandmother who guarded the children against all kinds of problems. (Chattopadhyay, 1979: 54-55).

Chatterji’s father and grandfather were interested in literature. His grandfather had in his collection Bengali translation of Mahabharata by Kaliprasanna Singha, an edition of Gita, works of Oliver Goldsmith, some English novels, Baisnab Padabali and such other literary works. Chatterji’s father who was a good poet and a violinist, used to buy selected old books and often read them to Suniti Kumar. As Chatterji’s Jīvan Kathā (1979) tells us—this habit of listening to the stories told by his father and reading different type of books, inspired Suniti Kumar to be a ‘bookworm’. When Prof. Chatterji became a loving father of his six children, he too, drew pictures, told stories and read out melodiously poems or epics of different countries to entertain his son and daughters.

An attack of polio had affected his eyes in early childhood and he had to go on with poor eyesight through the rest of his life. But neither this struggle as a member of a lower middle class family nor his extreme myopia ever stood in the way of his vast reading and creative works which continued till the end of his long energetic life of 87 years.

Early Education and Teachers: As most of the children of Bengali Hindu families get one of the family members as their first tutor, Suniti
Kumar’s first lessons on Bengali alphabet were taught by his mother at home. He was then taken to a Pathshala – a school shed in the outhouse of a well to do neighbour. There he practiced writing on the floor of the school shed with pieces of chalk.

In ‘S’ais’hab Smṛiti’ an autobiographical essay which is now a part of Jīvan Kathā (1979), Prof. Chatterji goes back to his childhood days and recollects his first day in the ‘pāths’hālā’. Kolkata was then a developing city and on either side of Sukias Street there were vast green fields spotted with small ponds and ditches. Most of the houses were single storied, mud walled and thatched with large round leaves. The only large building that one could look up to from the turning point of ‘Maćan Mitra’s Lane’ was a white temple of Lord Shiva (probably at the crossing of Amherst Street & Kailash Basu Road). This temple with a cluster of coconut trees in the front, remains as a bright and pleasant memory in Proc. Chatterji’s heart. In ‘S’ais’hab Smṛiti’ an article in Path Calti (1981) Dr. Chatterji presents wonderful descriptions of the primary school where he had his first lessons of reading and writing, the teacher and his method of teaching. The pāths’hālā where Suniti Kumar’s elder brother used to go, was in a small house in front of the temple. In those days the primary students had to start their first writing practice on the mud floor of the school courtyard with pieces of chalk. Then they could write on palm leaves and the ink used for this purpose was also home made. When the children went to pāths’hālā in
the morning, they used to carry with them bunches of palm leaves firmly tied with strings, books, earthen inkpot and small mats or cushions to sit on.

Prof. Chatterji recollects how, on seeing his elder brother attending pāths’hālā regularly, he wished to go there. He was overwhelmed with joy when, on one morning his mother permitted him to attend pāths’hālā. He went with his brother and maid servant who informed Gurumahashay of his admission. But Suniti Kumar’s first experience in pathshala was not as pleasant as he had expected it to be. He was disheartened to see the rows of ordinary small huts thatched with round leaves. Most of these rooms were occupied by Hindustani porters and in one of the huts beside the courtyard, lived the teacher with his family. The students used to sit on the courtyard in front of his room. Besides teaching, Gurumahashy (the teacher) had his task of writing letters, keeping accounts and doing mathematical calculations for his neighbours. In 1896, Suniti Kumar, a boy of six, was admitted to this Pathshala. The first meeting with the teacher was frightening for this little boy. Gurumahashay inspired his new student by saying that the latter would receive severe beating if he fails to read attentively or attend pāths’hālā regularly.
This experience in Prof. Chatterji's own words from 'S'haish'hab Smriti', a part of Jīvan Kathā, has been quoted below –

I went with my elder brother and stood there. The maid-servant told the teacher (Gurumasay) that from that today I would be admitted to the school. Gurumasay was happy. After that he inspired me by saying, "Well, you must come to school every morning. You must not cry before coming to school. And, you must study attentively; otherwise I will beat you severely with this cane." In my childhood I was much afraid of my father. Gurumasays warning frightened me. I shook my head and told my teacher, "Yes, I shall study attentively." Then I took my seat beside my brother and gave out a sigh of relief. (Chattopadhyay, 2008: 20). [Translated by me].

A few months later Suniti Kumar and his brother were admitted to the lowest class of Calcutta Academy and here Suniti Kumar read his first book of English reading and Bengali Second Book (Dvitiya Bhāg). With the out
break of Plague in Calcutta in 1898, the family shifted to Shibpur and lived for a year in Suniti Kumar’s maternal uncle’s house.

In 1899, after returning to Calcutta, Suniti Kumar and his brother got admission into Motilal Seals Free School (called a college) at Burrabazar. A very neat picture of Chatterji’s school life can be found in a narration by Prof. Sukumar Sen –

‘Soon after his admission into school he was recognized by some of his teachers as an exceptionally intelligent boy. He was very good and he topped all the boys, in all the subjects including Drawing, but not in Mathematics. The superintendent of the school, Brajendralal Ganguly who taught English and Mathematics in fifth class, (now class VI) was a very good teacher and a disciplinarian. The boy was taken to task in the heavy way usual in those days and then he was forced to work out repeatedly all the sums given in the exercises in the text book fixed for the class, Bernard Smith’s Arithmetic. Such rigorous training in Mathematics was continued till the last. At the University Examination Chatterji satisfied his teacher amply by obtaining 122 out of 160 in Mathematics. The Headmaster Jagabandhu Ghosh took special interest in him when he was in the top class.’ (Sen, 1980: 2-3).

Of these kind-hearted teachers on ‘uncommonly human man’ was head Pandit. Suniti Kumar Chatterji has drawn a lively sketch of this teacher, who was known to all as ‘Head Pañḍit Mas’āy’. Dr. Chatterji fails to recall his name clearly and mentions it as Prasanna Kumar Vidyaratna. He was called ‘Pāglā Pañḍit’ (a mad teacher) by the people. He had profound knowledge of
Sanskrit and spent most of his time and energy in teaching his students the subject as clearly as possible. He was deeply hurt if any of his dear students made any silly mistake. Chatterji narrates the story how Naren, one of the students wanted to irritate Head Pañdit by deriving on odd and incorrect from of the Sanskrit word Vṛksa ‘tree’ and how Pañdit reacted when he came to know of his favourite students mistake.

Prof. Chatterji writes about his beloved teacher –

‘পন্ডিতমশাইদের প্রাণটি নিত্যঃ কোমল ছিল। উড়িয়া বুকিলা রাস্তার যেয়া সমতল করার জন্য লোহার চোলার টানছে, তিনি কাতর-ভাবে তাদের দিকে তাকিয়ে দেখতেন, সেচারদের খালি পারে কত না জানি যাননা হচ্ছে। গোরক্ষ নিন্দুরভাবে মারার বিকচে, গোরক্ষর গাড়ির গাড়িয়ানের কাছে তাঁকে কাতর-ভাবে অনুষোচ করবতে আমাদেরই দু’একজন দেখেছি। তাঁর সন্ধে একটি গুল্প ছিল যে, একবার তিনি কই না মাছের মাছ কিনে বাড়ি নিয়ে আসেছেন। যখন তিনি গম্যান-বৃক্ষ মাছ নিয়ে পাড়ের উপর নিয়ে খাল পার হচ্ছেন, তখন তাঁর মনে হল, জল দেখে বুদ্ধি মাছগুলি ছটফট করছে। গম্যান-বৃক্ষ মাছগুলোকে তিনি উপরে তুলে খেল’র অভ্যাস করলেন, "থে যাবি বাবা, থে যাবি? তারর গম্যানটি থেকে উচ্চ কর’র মাছগুলোকে জলের মধ্যে ছেড়ে দিলেন।’

Pandit’s heart cried for poor helpless creatures whether be it a human being or an animal. Whenever he saw any creature being cruelly treated or exploited, he tried to raise his voice against such behaviour. Once he bought some fishes – Magur or Koi, placed these living creatures on his bath-towel, folded it, tied a knot and was returning home. As he was crossing a bridge on a canal, the fishes inside the towel started moving. Head Pandit thought that the fishes surely had got the smell of water. He gently asked the fishes whether they wanted to return home. Then he untied the knot and let the
It was believed by some students and guardians of that time Head Pandit had a soft corner for poor and needy students and treated them with special care. So, in order to draw his sympathy, the boys of well-to-do families often came in old and shabby clothes. In this essay Chatterji recollects such other interesting episodes of his school life that depicted the relationship of this outstanding man with his students.

Dr. Chatterji’s autobiographical articles make it clear to us that his teachers not only helped in the character development of the young scholar, but had a deep impact on his life as a whole. They lighted his way to a higher, sublime world of sympathy, generosity and adjustment. Chatterji’s colleagues and successors have often spoken of his ‘humanism’, acts of benevolence and charity. From Prof. Devdas Sen’s comments one can have an idea of Dr. Chatterji’s rich ‘qualities of the heart’ – “His life teems with instances of large-heartedness and generosity: Was a young enthusiast badly in need of a book or a curio? Well, Professor Chatterji at once made a gift of it to him. ....Was a hapless abducted girl, rescued from Noakhali and brought over to Calcutta, to be settled down to married life? The Brahmin Professor at once volunteered his services as a priest at the wedding”. Even a servant’s illness would so upset him that he would personally look after him. (Sen, 1978-79(a): 19). These rich qualities could possibly have its source in the educational training through which he passed his boyhood days.

*fishes go back to water.* (Chattopadhyay, 1979: 154-156). [Translated by me].

73
Prof. Chatterji's interest as a child: Prof. Chatterji's interest in classical music developed from his childhood, when his family had to live at Shibpur as tenants of Katyani Devi’s paternal house for a year as Plague had broken out in Calcutta. Shibpur was then a developed village on the bank of Bhagirathi and had its own special features. Here the well-to-do gentlemen loved festivals, theatre (yātrā), poets’ duel and engaged themselves in the study of Sanskrit or Classical music. The maternal uncles of Suniti Kumar were lovers of classical music and in their house Chatterji, a boy of eight, got the chance of attending programmes on classical music presented by some of the eminent singers of that time. Prof. Chatterji further states that classical music did not attract him at first. With the other young boys of his maternal uncle’s house, he used to play with the musical instruments of the music-hall, when the elderly persons were not present there (Chattopadhyay, 1990: 81).

Gradually this atmosphere shaped the mind of the young boy as a lover of music particularly Dhrupad songs, Suniti Kumar mentions the name of Nikunja Behari Dutta an eminent singer of Dhrupad of his time.

Prof. Chatterji speaks of this melody of Dhrupad –
I was spending my childhood in this atmosphere of melody and musical practices. One rainy afternoon the sky was overcast with cloud and it was raining. We could not engage ourselves in outdoor games – the favourite game of the boys of Shibpur village was to run about with half coconut shells tied under their feet. This coconut shells would produce the sound of horses’ hoofs. In the drawing room of my maternal uncles’ house blind Nikunja Dutta was singing a Dhrupad based on Raag ‘Megha Mallar’. Another musician was playing on pakhawaj and two or three persons were listening quietly. That stream of melody matched with the weather of the day at once made me a life-long devotee of Indian Dhrupad songs – ‘this deep, heavy shower of rain is exposing the beauty of the season’ (Chattopadhyay, 1990: 82). [Translated by me].

This taste of classical music which grew in him in the childhood days attained maturity and refinement in the later years when Sangeet Nayak Gopeshwar Bandyopadhyay of Vishnupur School of Music became his next door neighbour at Sukias row. For some years Suniti Kumar could enjoy the musical programmes at the residence of his great classical singer of Bengal.

Prof. Chatterji remarks that his acquaintance with the paintings by Abanindranath Tagore and with Mughal, Rajput and Kangra Style of painting were one of the most memorable events that impressed his young mind.
As a child he used to collect colourful pictures of uniformed soldiers of different countries and historical events. When he was a school student he become a member of the boy’s branch of Young Men’s Christian Association and came in contact with Aurther Lefevre, the person in-charge of that institution. The boys could visit a place of interest with him once in every week. One day he took them to Government Art Gallery. It was a golden experience for Suniti Kumar Chatterji. There he was highly delighted to see the Indian miniature paintings particularly those of Abanindranath Tagore – ‘Buddha and Sujātā’, ‘Dewali’ or ‘Feast of Lamps’, ‘A Moonlight Music Party’, ‘The Siddhas of the Upper Air’ (see next page). After this experience Suniti Kumar became a frequent visitor to this Art Gallery.

In one of the essays on Abanindranath Tagore collected in Maniṣi Smaraṇe (1990) Prof. Chatterji writes how he appreciated the works of Abanindranath when Chatterji was a teenager boy.

Few lines from Maniṣi Smaraṇe (1990) may be quoted to explain this influence –

অবনীন্দ্রনাথ ঠাকুর তে, তখন তার কিছুই জানতুম না।কিছু কে তিনি — ওলকদার হিসেু আর মুসলমান যুগের ভারতের মধ্যে যে হাঁহালের সঙ্গে তাল মিলিয়ে।' এমন অজুত সুন্দর তারে প্রার্থনা ভারতের জীবনের অসন্নিহিত রোমাঞ্চ এই সুন্দর রেখাপত্রের আর বর্তমানৈর মাধ্যমে আমার সামনে ধরে দিয়ে আমাকে যেন ধন্য করে লেন। তেরো বছর বয়সের ছেলে আমি, তখন কাশিদাস পাঠিনি, বর্তমানৈরো পাঠিনি। এই ঘটনার বছর লেডুই পোর যখন প্রথম রবীন্দ্রনাথের কবিতা পড়লেম, ‘ঋষি ও কাহিনি’, ‘শোনার তরী’ আর ‘চিতা’র কবিতা থেকে যে অনাল্পনিত-পূর্ণ রস পেলুম, তখন মনে হ’ল, এইসব কবিতার উল্লেখ্য ছবি তো একমাত্র অবনীন্দ্রনাথই করে সীমিত। এই ছবি
THE SIDDHAS OF THE UPPER AIR

A PAINTING BY ABANINDRANATH TAGORE

[SEE Pg - 76]
At that time I did not know who Abanindranath Tagore was. But I was curious to know the identity of that person who could produce such a series of fine paintings that were in harmony with the paintings of Hindu Era and Mediaeval Muslim Era. This great artist could so finely express the romance of the inner life of the Ancient Indians in his beautiful line drawings and wonderful colour combination. I was then a mere boy of thirteen and had not read Kalidas or Rabindranath Tagore. About one and half years after I saw the paintings, I started reading the poems by Rabindranath Tagore – “Kathā O Kāhini”, “Sonār Tari”, “Citrā”, and enjoyed this new taste of poetic expression. I then realised that it was Abanindranath alone who could so finely depict the images reflected in these poems. (Chattopadhyay, 1990: 143-144). [Translated by me].

In the next Chapter titled ‘Chatterji’s Range of Interests’ it will be explained how this interest in fine arts would gradually become a part of his self.

Influence of Swami Vivekananda and Kabiguru Rabindranath on Chatterji’s early life: Swami Vivekananda’s explanation of Vedanta and his teachings were one of the greatest treasures that came to Suniti Kumar in his early life Dr. Chatterji often expressed his grief saying that though he belonged to the same age as that of Vivekananda he could not have a look at
or come in personal contact with this Maker of Modern India. Swamiji left for his eternal abode when Suniti Kumar was only twelve years old (1902).

Prof. Chatterji’s father Haridas Chatterji was a friend and neighbour of Narendranath Dutta. Chatterji’s house was situated in Simulia Chaltabagan area and was quite close to Gourmohan Mukherjee Street where Swamiji, then called ‘Naren’ lived in his ancestral house. In ‘Yugābatār Śrī Vivekananda’ (Maniśī Smaraṇe, 1990) Suniti Kumar mentions that his father, Naren Dutta and some other boys of same age group used to assemble beside Hedua Pond (Cornwallis Square) to have discussions on series socio-religious matters. Haridas Chatterji never uttered the name ‘Vivekananda’ but he often spoke of Naren Dutta’s views and activities.

A year after Swamiji’s death Suniti Kumar could make himself familiar with the life history and teachings of Vivekananda. When Chatterji was a student of the fourth class of Motilal Seal’s Free School he got Prabhat Kumar Bardhan as his classmate. Prabhat’s father Chandicharan Bardhan, a resident of Sarpentine Lane in Bahubazar area of Calcutta, had established a school and a library at his residence Chandicharan Bardhan was a close follower Sri Ramkrishna Paramhansa and in his library he had a collection of English and Bengali books by Swamiji, books on Sri Ramkrishna and on Hindu religion and culture. He allowed Suniti Kumar to take home and read many of these books. Young Suniti Kumar’s heart was filled with joy and reverence as he went through ‘From Colombo to Almora’, Chicago Address’, My Master’ by Swami Vivekananda.
In ‘Yugāṭar Śrī Vīvēkananda’ (An article in Manīṣī Smaraṇe) Prof. Chatterji writes—

Here some questions arise, firstly what I myself got from Vīvēkananda, secondly what we Indians got from this great master and thirdly what the whole human race has received from him. The answer to the first question, is that a detailed analysis of how I was influenced by Swamīji was not possible, for it would only be my self analysis. But in brief I can say that the two main qualities that developed in my young mind were the power of self consciousness and self survey which ultimately leads to self control. I have not yet formed any idea of what or who I am. But when I had opened the doors and windows of my mind and was waiting eagerly for the light of knowledge from outside to stream in, the philosophy of Vedanta as it was analysed by Swamīji, together with the realisation of Jīvan-devaṇātha.”
imagined by Tagore, showed him the way to Universal Truth. (Chattopadhyay, 1990: 123). [Translated by me].

This realisation of Truth again rocked his mind, when in his youth he read Tagore’s poems and tried to understand the presence of ‘Jīvan Devatā’ in human life – the relationship of love and admiration of Man with his Creator. Thus, from a very early stage of his life, a yearning for an ‘Ultimate Reality’ grew in him – ‘a Reality that to the contemplative man is revealed as ‘Ānanda’ or ‘Bliss’, a ‘Compelling Sense of Joy’.

With Rabindranath Tagore and Shantiniketan Suniti Kumar had a close and lifelong relationship. He admired the poet not only as one of the greatest writers of Bengali language but as a witty conversationalist and a ‘keen philologist’ as well.

Suniti Kumar became familiar with Tagore’s writings through his classmate Gourgovinda Gupta, who belonged to the family of poet Iswar Chandra Gupta. Gourgovinda was an old student of Brahmacharyashram of Shantiniketan and a follower of Brahmabandhab Upadhyay. This friend made Suniti Kumar an attentive reader of Tagore’s works – ‘Mānasī’, ‘Sonār Torī’, ‘Citrā’ which were being published when Suniti Kumar was a young student. These collections of poems opened for him the doorways to the world of dreams and beauty. He first saw the poet at the time of Swadeshi Movement when the poet came to attend a meeting held by the ‘Dawn Society’. Then Chatterji had some chances to meet Tagore when he
was a member of the University Institute. After passing B.A. Examination Suniti Kumar went to Shantiniketan and had discussions with the poet on Bengali language. In 1919 Chatterji went to England. In 1920 Tagore went to London and Chatterji often visited him there. In these few months of Tagore’s stay in England Suniti Kumar became closer to the poet through frequent meetings. Suniti Kumar’s experience of traveling through ‘Greater India’ – presently Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia with Rabindranath Tagore has been presented later.

*Chatterji’s College Days:* In the University Entrance Examination (1907) Suniti Kumar Chatterji was in the sixth position in order of merit. This result won him a first grade Government Scholarship. He then joined General Assembly’s institution and after two years passed the First Arts Examination (1909) in the first division, obtaining a government scholarship. From Presidency College he passed B.A. examination with honours in English and secured the top position in the first class.

During this period Chatterji had the teachers like Dr. Steven, Dr. Arkheart who were versatile scholars of the first rank. These teachers helped Suniti Kumar to acquire a thorough knowledge of the Western languages. On the other hand his sincere and continuous efforts helped him to study the Indian languages – Hindi, Oriya, Assamese and Tamil. With an indomitable desire to explore new fields of knowledge Suniti Kumar continued to study languages and literature together with world history. In spite of his low financial capacity and poor eyesight he had become a frequent visitor to libraries and study centres, as well as old and new book shops for reading and collection of books. He was fortunate that Bipin Chandra Sen,
Adharchandra Mukherji (History) of Scotish Church, Nandalal Bidyabinod, Beharilal Bandyopadhyay (Sanskrit), Manmathanath Basu (Bengali), H.M.Percival, Binayendranath Sen, Manmohan Ghosh, Prafulla Chandra Ghosh of Presidency College and such other eminent scholars of the time were his teachers. Their guidance infused in Suniti Kumar a love of European history and literature. At the same time the study of Indian languages and literature continued. The highly enthusiastic student was introduced to the classical texts and this interest in the later years matured into a firm rooted admiration for Classical literature, Indian and European and helped him to study the cultural set up of the different nations of the world.

In his college years Chatterji got Shishir Kumar Bhaduri as one of his close friends, Shishir Bhaduri was a student of English literature and chose college teaching as his profession. But he was later on recognised as one of the best actors and masters of the stage. His friendship with Chatterji became a lifelong one and it was the root of Chatterji’s interest in mimic art and stage craft.

Post Graduation: Chatterji chose English language Group ‘B’ as his subject of study for M.A. Course. English Group ‘B’ syllabus at that time was slightly different from the syllabus as it is now. When Chatterji was a student of Group ‘B’ course, the syllabus included a paper on Old English, a paper on Middle English, a half paper on comparative Germanic and a half paper on Old Icelandic. Thus Chatterji had a very good ground work both in historical and in comparative linguistics. At the M.A. Examination Chatterji stood first in first class (in his group).
During this period Suniti Kumar engaged himself to the study of Vedas and passed Adya and Madhya Examinations in this subject (1918) from Government Sanskrit Association. (Bhattacharya, 2006: 7).

After completing his post graduation Suniti Kumar joined Metropolitan Institution as a teacher, Asutosh Mukherji soon recruited him as an assistant to Professor Robert Knox (1914-1919) in the University which had since 1910 started post graduate teaching in English, Sanskrit and other subjects including Comparative Philology.

Prof. Chatterji's Marriage & Family: Suniti Kumar Chattertji was married in 1914 to Kamala Devi (1900-1964) the eldest child of Bishnusankar Mukhopadhyay & Banalata Devi. They belonged to a well to do Brahmin family which had settled in South Bihar from the late seventeenth century. This marriage was blessed with five daughters – Ruchi, Rama, Nila, Sati, Suchi and a son – Suman.

The Young Scholar: Chatterji’s father desired that the young scholar should join Government Service as a Deputy Magistrate or the like. But Suniti Kumar had poor eye sight and he felt that it would be difficult for him to continue with government service. So he chose teaching as his profession. When he got appointment as a University teacher he had ample scope of research work for attaining further qualification. He had specialized in Old English, Middle English and had a sound base in Teutonic philology. But there was no guide in Calcutta who would have guided him in his research
work in the Germanic branch of Indo European languages. So he chose his mother tongue Bengali as his subject of research. According to Dr. Sukumar Sen there were some notable reasons behind this choice. (Sen, 1980: 6-7). Firstly the growing feeling of nationalist enthusiasm among the educated Bengali Youths had made them feel the importance of their own language and literature. Secondly, the discovery of the Mystic Buddhist Carya and songs by Mahamohopadhyay Haraprasad Shastri, Śrī-Kṛṣṇa-Kūṭana by Basanta Ranjan Roy had made the scholars conscious of the fact that the history of Bengali language and literature extended beyond fifteenth century. Thirdly, Bengali literature was placed in a very high rank of prestige when Rabindranath Tagore got Nobel Prize for literature in 1913. Most of the educated societies of the world became familiar with Tagore’s name as a great poet of Bengal. Suniti Kumar Chatterji too, felt the necessity of research work regarding the origin and history of Bengali language. His studies related to this subject won for him Prem Chand Roychand Studentship in 1916 and Jubilee research prize in 1917. He studied Persian element in Bengali, Bengali verb and verb root, the language of Cāryā songs as P.R. student. His subject of study for the Jubilee prize was Bengali dialects.

In 1919 Chatterji won a Government of India scholarship for scientific study of Sanskrit and other allied subjects abroad. In September he set out for London and there he was admitted to the newly established School of Oriental and African Studies which was affiliated to London University. He stayed for three years in Europe and his career in the Universities of London and Paris was most precious as a formative part of the young scholar’s life (1919-1922). Chatterji’s study and research work under the guidance of the
eminent linguists of England and France would equip him with a scientific insight, which in the following years would help him to understand the different situations of linguistic diversities and language problems of India.

In London, Suniti Kumar Chatterji came in contact with some of the greatest scholars of his time. Dr. L. D. Barnett with whom Dr. Chatterji read Prakrit and who supervised his work in London; Dr. F. W. Thomas, who as lecturer in Comparative Philology at University College guided Suniti Kumar in his study of Indo-European Philology; Prof. Daniel Jones who taught him Phonetics; Sir E. Denison Ross, Director of the School of Oriental Studies, Prof. R. W. Chambers (of University College), and Messrs. E. H. G. Grattan and Robin Flower (of University College) were some of them. One of his teachers was Prof. Daniel Jones of whom Suniti Kumar says –

‘Prof. Daniel Jones under whom I studied phonetics was not only my S’ikšāguru, but also a warm friend and a helper’. (ODBL, 1926 -Preface; Chatterji, 1993: xii).

While he was in France he had the privilege of sitting at the fact of masters like Antoine Meillet for different branches of Indo-European linguistics and of studying Sanskrit and other Indo-Aryan philology under Prof. Jules Bloch besides meeting other eminent scholars like Prof. Sylvan Levi, Paul Pelliot and Jean Przylusky. Prof. Chatterji also speaks of his great fortune of coming in personal touch with Jules Bloch and George Grierson who inspired him and took personal interest in his work. Their supervision has benefited Suniti Kumar to the greatest degree imaginable. The same may be said of Prof. Meillet. (ODBL, 1926 -Preface; Chatterji, 1993: xii-xiii).
Suniti Kumar’s greatest creation *The Origin and Development of the Bengali Language (ODBL)* was being prepared in London in 1920-21 and it was being looked over in its first draft by Dr. Barnett who gave his helpful advice in suggesting improvement in arrangement, in the general treatment as well as some references. After this work was approved by University of London, Prof. Grierson and Prof. Meillet enriched the work by their careful and valuable criticism and suggestions. Chatterji received some references and one or two suggestion from his friends in Calcutta. He specially mentions the name of Hemchandra Roychowdhuy, his old college friend and colleague in the University and Prof. Satyendranath Basu of The University of Dacca for their suggestions in the earlier part of the work.

For this work (ODBL) Suniti Kumar was honoured with D.Litt degree by London University in the year 1921. While he was in Paris he was appointed Khaira Professor of Indian Linguistics and Phonetics by University of Calcutta. In 1922 Prof. Chatterji returned to India and joined the University of Calcutta as the Khaira Professor.

His first experience of seeing London was embittered by the problem that he faced in finding his way into and out of the port a couple of days before the railway strike. He could not feel the charm of visiting a foreign city for the first time, as London with its long dusty streets, roads, grey smoky sky and high-speed vehicles appeared to be much like Calcutta, Prof. Chatterj’s own town. He could feel the heart beat of the great city and its ominous existence like that of a great monster, waiting to engulf one into its whirlpool of fast mechanical life.

Later he gradually accepted his life in London with a sporting enthusiasm and attached himself to Y.M.C.A. Recreation Club where he had the scope of mixing with the English boys and girls and knowing their life and culture. At this time his love of Negro Art grew and the little time that he could save after his academic work was spent at the British Museum. There he was attracted by the beauty of the bronze statues and plates of Benin in West Africa, wood carvings of Congo and other places. He went through the books on Negro life, history and culture that he got in the library. Thus for the frequent visitor in the British Museum hours flew on rosy wings as his love for Negro Art deepened along with his study of European life and culture.

During this period Chatterji came in contact with few Negro people living in and around London. He longed eagerly for the friendship of Negro Students staying in the hostels. One summer morning a day’s outing was arranged by the hostel superintendent and Suniti Kumar luckily had a Negro Youth in his subgroup of six. A whole day was enough for Chatterji for a close personal interaction with his first Negro friend N.A. Fadipe – a stout
well-built youth with a dark chocolate brown complexion which was just next to black, with a face highlighted by a simple innocent smile. Fadipe belonged to the Yoruba family of the Negroes and came from Lagos in British Nigeria. While answering Chatterji’s questions on the religion of the Yoruba, Fadipe informed that his ancestors had adopted Christianity and he knew title of the ‘pagans’ and ‘paganism’ in his country. But he explained the meaning of his name ‘Fadipe’ which meant ‘The gift of God Ifa’. Ifa was the God of oracle in Yoruba religion and this God was revered and worshipped by most of the Yoruba. God Ifa had his own priest and answered questions put to him by the devotees through the priest. This God was to be satisfied by the offerings of fruits, wine, cock, kola nuts and so on. Fadipe could say nothing more but mentioned that most of the converted Yoruba had given up their ancestral name but his ancestors had not done so, mainly due to their patriotism and a respect for their national character.

This hearty close and informative conversation with Fadipe revealed to Chatterji the condition of the Yoruba in British Nigeria – that they had adopted Christianity mainly due to socio-political reasons and that a Negro like Fadipe was a ‘fish out of water’ in the country of Whites. (Chattopadhyay, 1981: 41-43).

With Tagore, Roerich and Others: In 1920 when Suniti Kumar was preparing his doctoral thesis in London he made a still higher gain through his frequent visit to Tagore’s residence when the latter was staying in London. Suniti Kumar had met Tagore earlier in India – in Metropolitan Institution, in the University Institute and in Shantiniketan where the young linguist had a discussion with the poet on Bengali language. As Tagore
himself was much interested in the study of the nature of Bengali language he appreciated the efforts of Suniti Kumar who was making use of the linguistic techniques in the study of Bengali language. So when Chatterji came to see Tagore in his temporary residence in London, he was received by the poet with love and admiration. Tagore allowed Chatterji to have discussion on many serious topics and as a result of such conversations Chatterji could clear himself of his confusions and mistakes. Thus Chatterji’s comments on various topics of Bengali became more modified and matured. This personal attachment with Tagore gave Chatterji the scope of meeting many eminent personalities of east and west – the poets, artists and politicians who came to meet Tagore. Here Chatterji met Lawrence Bynion, William Rotenstine, Lord Sinha, Sir K.G. Gupta, Dilip Roy and the famous Irish poet Yeats.

At that time the eminent Russian artist Nicholais Roerich was living a exiled life in London. As he was against Soviet or Bolshevik rule in Russia he was forced to leave the country and was staying in London. His elder son Yuri Roerich was studying in School of Oriental Studies in London where Suniti Kumar also was a student. As we already know that Chatterji was much interested in art, a bond of friendship grew up between the two. Yuri invited Chatterji to meet his father. Both Nicholais Roerich and his wife were enthusiastic readers of Tagore’s poems. With Chatterji the Russian artist came to visit Rabindranath Tagore and presented a Russian translation of one of Tagore’s poems. Thus Chatterji witnessed the first meeting of one of the world’s greatest artists with another and this relationship between the two was blessed with many happy moments throughout their lives.
In an essay which is now a part of 'Path calti' Suniti Kumar presents a neat account of Rabindranath Tagore’s stay in London. He admits that he had not maintained a diary of the particulars of each and every meeting with Tagore. He would not make this mistake a second time when he would join Tagore’s party for a trip to Dvīpamay Bhārat. Here a finer depiction of Tagore’s personality would be found in the interesting Travelogue – Rabindra Saṅgame Dvīpamay Bhārat O S’yam Des’ (1954).

*Cultural life in London & Paris*: While Chatterji was in London and in Paris he got chance to see some of the finest dramatic performances of the time. We know that he became keenly interested in mimic art and stagecraft when he entered college and the various types of theatrical performances, pantomimes, pastoral plays that he saw in the greatest centers of European culture, contributed much to the making of the versatile scholar. In his essay on the stages of London and Paris Suniti Kumar speaks of this experience (*Path Calti*, Vol II, 1964).

The first drama that he saw in London was a famous pantomime in Drury Lane Theatre. Prof. Chatterji comments that this type of drama with its colourful scenes, human and animal characters, cances of clowns were attractive to children and not so unpleasant to the aged people. He saw a simple type of play with gay picturesque scenes and puppet like characters in Paris. It was a dramatized form of a Fairy tale story of a hero approaching the battle field with his army and of a humble young girl. It reminded Prof. Chatterji of the poem by Tagore – ‘S’ubhakṣan’. This poem could be a
beautiful piece of play with an old fairy tale atmosphere and lyrical quality, if staged in this way.

At that time Shakespeare was not a very popular dramatist in England. Only some special groups of actors as in Old Vic Theatre in Southwark area sometimes staged Shakespeare’s plays but failed to attract the common half educated folk of England. In Old Vic Theatre Prof. Chatterji found that only highly educated persons, college students, foreign tourists and scholars who had attained a higher level of intellectual maturity attended the shows. Prof. Chatterji discussed the problem with his teacher Prof. H.M. Percival who after his retirement from service at Presidency College, Calcutta, was then residing in England. According to Prof. Percival, the mental and moral degradation of the English people in the twentieth century was responsible for this. But Chatterji further analysed the causes from linguistic and cultural points of view. Firstly the language of Shakespeare’s plays, three and a half centuries old, could not be easily followed by the common people.

Secondly the stately/lofty style and the Old poetic atmosphere of these plays were not accepted by a layman living in the busy prosaic world of modern age. On the other hand the plays based on social or economic problems had become more popular. Chatterji enjoyed two such widely accepted plays – the white-headed Boy, a comedy by the Irish dramatists and Beggar’s Opera based on the life of the poor toiling classes of the English society.

Stagecraft had a more important place in the cultural life of Paris. Prof. Chatterji realized that the French people considered theatrical performances
music and dance as creative arts of a very high rank. In France and some other countries in Europe dramatic performances were treated as a separate branch of Government administration. In Paris there were three Government theatre halls – Opera, Comedie Francaise and Odeon, a part from many other private halls.

In this essay on the stagecraft of London and Paris (included in *Path Calti Vol II*, 1964), Prof. Chatterji further tell us how Opera as a dramatic performance, accompanied by melodious songs and orchestra, was born in Italy and then gained popularity in France. It attained its highest level of excellence in the works of the eminent dramatist Wagner in Germany. In most of the countries as Austria, Hungary, Russia, Finland, National Opera occupied a position of popularity and prestige. Prof. Chatterji remarks that in France the Opera Hall stood as an example of a grand work of architecture of the French people. Situated on one side of the main road Place de l’ opera, the Opera Hall was like a beautiful palace where the common people could enter. On the façade there were statues by the famous artists and sculptors of France. Among this, a cluster of statues on dance forms – ‘The Dance’ by J.B.Carpeaux was considered as one of the finest works of modern French sculpture.

In this Opera Hall Prof. Chatterji enjoyed musical drama by the Italian composer Verdi, French composer Debussi and Wagner (Germany). Prof. Chatterji was more fortunate, for when he was in Paris, Tercentenary Festival of the French dramatist Moliere (who’s real name was Jean Baptiste Poquelin) was celebrated in Odeon theatre. The famous comedy ‘Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme’ of Moliere was staged. Another drama based on
the life and career of Moliere, was especially composed for Tercentenary Ceremony. Apart from presenting the minute details of Moliere’s literary and personal life, this drama depicted the aspirations, pride and prejudice of the seventeenth century aristocratic society and the grandeur of Louis XIV’s court. Prof. Chatterji was deeply moved by the scene where Moliere, who could make the world rock with laughter with his wit and humour, was crying with grief and pain after his shrewish wife had blamed and insulted him.

In spite of having such a rare experience, Prof. Chatterji was repeatedly being reminded of the plays of Tagore that he had seen in Calcutta and Shantiniketan. According to him Tagore’s ‘Dākghar’, ‘Rājā’, ‘Phālgunī’ as well as some other plays like ‘Sītā’, ‘Sorās’ī’ which were staged by Shishir Kumar Bhaduri could compete with the best dramatic performances of the world.

**Traveling:**

(a) **London and Paris:** For Chatterji traveling was always a part of education. While he was in London or Paris he did not miss the chance of visiting the surrounding areas. He journeyed to Italy and Greece. A month’s holiday took him to Scotland and Lake District where he enjoyed traveling among the highlands. But he condemned the vulgarity at the Sea Side Place in Blackpool. He was shocked to find the ladies of Pure English blood acting as fortune-tellers for little income.
In a letter to Pramatha Chowdhury, Chatterji expressed his views on socio-political scene in Europe comparing it to that of India. He was disheartened to see the wide gap between intellectual or spiritual ideas related to democracy, emancipation of intellect, freedom of spirit that were grinded in him when he was in his own country and the real form of democracy that he saw in England. He concluded that modern Man was heading towards a darker future – a more complicated life.

For about a year Chatterji stayed in Paris and studied linguistics under the guidance of Prof. Antoine Meillet, Jules Bloch and others. In May 1922 he went to Padua in Italy to attend the seventh centenary of the establishment of the University there. He was present as one of the delegates of the University of Calcutta and read an address in Sanskrit on behalf of the delegation from Calcutta. Then he visited Venice, Bologna and Ravenna and enjoyed seeing some works of art and architecture.

(b) Greece: From Ravenna Prof. Chatterji traveled to Athens via Brindisi. The beauty of Athens arrested his mind. He narrates this experience in one of his letters (written in Bengali) to an elderly friend on 7th June 1922 (This letter was printed in Sabuj Patra in 1922). Here he describes the simple but the most beautiful style of Parthenon and other Greek temples of the type which had embodied in them the depth, power and tenderness that remained unparalleled in the whole world. Chatterji always had a keen interest for Greek literature and Greek architecture and often compared these to the calm refreshing breeze of the Aegean Sea.
In 1927 Prof. Chatterji had a chance of visiting Indonesia and neighbouring islands with Rabindranath Tagore. This group including Tagore and some of his associates started for Indonesia on 12th July. The journey continued for three and half months and the relationship of respect and affection between Suniti Kumar and Rabindranath Tagore became deeper. Chatterji maintained a diary of Tagore’s views and activities, as well as of his own. They visited the places and people of the mixed culture which was an interesting blending of Indian and Indonesian elements. New horizons in the cultural history of Ancient India and Far South East Asia were opened to Prof. Chatterji. This task of writing the day to day affairs, the experience of seeing the historical, religious, cultural centres, works of art and erudition, the pleasure of meeting the educated persons as well as common folk of different languages and culture – all produced Dr. Chatterji’s master piece among his Bengali literary works – *Dvipamay Bhārat* (1940).

This travelogue throws light on the development of Prof. Chatterji’s views on world religion and relationship of the Hindus to the other ancient of the world. He narrates his experience of visiting a Buddhist ‘Vihara’ in Malaya where he had discussions with the principal of ‘Vihara’ on Buddhist religion. The monk experienced the revival of Buddhist philosophy in China, how the educated class of people who had been the followers of Confucias, were showing interest in Buddhism for deeper philosophical studies. When Prof. Chatterji returned home, the face of smiling Buddha, the symbol of peace and satisfaction flashed in his ‘inward eye’ and he realized that being a member of the Bengalese society he was far away from the land of China,
but still he felt a strong spiritual attraction for the people of China as if their religion was identical with his own religious views. Rabindranath Tagore in his *Jāvā Yatrīr Patra* (1929), commented on Suniti Kumar’s observation and style of expression—

A translation of the above lines of Tagore, by Dr. Sukumar Sen, can be found in *Scholar and Virtuoso* (1980)—

*There in Suniti in our party. I knew him to be a clear-cut scholar. That is, I was convinced that he was an expert in the business of slicing a whole into pieces and of joining pieces into a whole. But I have now discovered that the world which always presents perpetual flow of pictures and visions running in a crowd and never stopping for a moment, could be easily caught by him in complete and fast without losing its rhythm of movement and put down*
faithfully and quickly in writing. At the root of this gift is his lively interest in
the affair of the world around us. Nothing appears trite or trifling to him,
and his pen treats a trifle in such a manner that it assumes significance. It
can be said in general that those who have gone deep into the mystery of the
science of language the gallery of the art of speech is beyond their reach as
the latter belongs to the upper level. But Suniti’s perception does not
smother the flowing picture of language to get at the essence of speech. It is
marvelous. Suniti’s stuffed letters will reach you in due course. You would
find them sheer imperial dispatch. Here is imperialism in epistle writing; it
is all compassing in the realm of description. Nothing is missing from it,
neither the big nor the small. (Sen, 1980: 51).

Prof. Chatterji also narrates how Rabindranath Tagore was received with
deep respect and enthusiasm by the people of these island countries as
Singapore, Malaya or Java. The poet was accepted as a noble literary artist
coming from India – the land of Lord Buddha. On his sixty fourth birthday
Tagore got a Chinese translation of his name from his Chinese friends – Chu
Chen Tan which means ‘Thunder and Sunlight of India’ ( Rabi + Indra ) =
Rabindra.

Dr. Chatterji mentions an amusing incident which took place in the ship
on their way to Bali. A Christian missionary insisted on a meeting with
Tagore for two minutes by the clock’ and requested Suniti Kumar to take
him to the poet. Tagore, with some hesitation granted him permission. The
Christian missionary tried to impress upon the poet that Tagore’s religious
views were identical with those of the Christians. Tagore refused to admit
this and he earlier had some bitter experience of facing such Christian
missionaries who had tried to convert him. Suniti Kumar knew this fact. When he saw that even after the poet’s refusal, the missionary had started a debate by saying that the Hindus, (or the Brahmas) like the Christians worship God as ‘God the Father’, Dr. Chatterji presented his own ideas in order to rescue the poet. He stated that Tagore had faith in that philosophy where God is worshipped not only as ‘God the Father’ but also as ‘God the Mother’, ‘God the son’, ‘God the Friend’, ‘God the Lover’ and even as ‘God the sweet-heart’. The missionary was much confused and hastily left the place.

Thus we find that Prof. Chatterji’s ‘Dvipamay Bhārat’ is not only a narration of how Chatterji visited the island countries and enjoyed Tagore’s company, but it is an account of how as a young scholar, Dr. Chatterji shared Tagore’s thoughts and ideals and how these ideals had a deep impact upon him in his later life. Here Suniti Kumar makes his readers feel the existence of Tagore’s ‘Jīvan Devāfā’ the God who rows our boat down the stream of life and who is worshipped in many forms. This God (or Goddess) is neither a Christian God nor a Hindu one but comes out of Man’s inner vision and takes His (or Her) shape as Man wishes him (or her) to take. The presence of this God can be felt in almost all of Tagore’s immortal poems of ‘Sonār Tārī’ or ‘Gītānjali’.

In the concluding part of this travelogue Prof. Chatterji describes this tour as the ‘Maha-Guru-Vijay’ – the journey of Sankaracharya through India is described as ‘Sankar-Vijay’. The World Poet’s visit to Indonesia, Siam and
other countries strengthened the bond of cultural relationship of these countries with India.

To Rabindranath Tagore the prose style of Suniti Kumar was like the clear refreshing water of a mountain stream. In the core of his heart Suniti Kumar was a sensitive artist for whom the theories of philology never shadowed the images of common life around him. So he excelled in the art of letter writing. Rabindranath often spoke of his beautiful style of letter writing and commented that Suniti should get the title ‘Lipibachaspati’, ‘Lipisarbabhouma’ or ‘Lipichakraborti’ - ‘The Emperor of the Art of letter writing’.

_Suniti Kumar Chatterji as a member of ‘Monday Club’_: While discussing the early life of Suniti Kumar and his training as a young scholar, we should say a few words about how he came in contact with Sukumar Roy and the members of his ‘Monday Club’. Sukumar Roy was popular among his admirers as ‘Tātā-dā’; He was then the leader of a group of young men most of whom were Brahmas. But Sukumar Roy’s view on religion was much liberal and religion never stood in the way of his friendship. So Suniti Kumar, being a Hindu, was a member of ‘Monday Club’ which was a modified form of ‘Nonsense Club’ established by Sukumar Roy. Some of the eminent personalities of that time like Satyendranath Dutta, Charuchandra Bandopadhyay and Prasanta Chandra Mahalanbis were friends and neighbours of Sukumar Roy and with such members he had established the club. The members used to have their meetings usually on Mondays. So the club became known as ‘Monday Club’. The members
shared their leader’s enthusiasm, wit and humour. They not only loved discussions, comedy, fun and banter, they also loved feast and picnic. Suniti Kumar who, had along with other charming qualities, a very fine taste for good food, was one of them. Once, when he wanted to have a feast, the invitation letter of the club came out as –

Ah! Another Feast!

Just a few days back I explained it to all that you must not be so greedy and enthusiastic about feasts, but Suniti Babu again, wants to have a feast. He has forcibly handed me some money and threatened me that if I fail to arrange a feast, he will persuade Jangli Babu to file a case against me. I begged him earnestly not to do such things, but he would not listen to me and was about to beat me. What injustice! So, when you are not going to follow my advice, I have requested Sukumar Babu to arrange a feast which
will be held at his residence on coming Tuesday (July 30). I hope you will be very fine and attend this feast at 7 o’clock in the evening. Sunitibabu’s picnic party will be present there. Now are you happy?

(Desh, 6th September, 1986, p.46)

[Translated by me]

Disgusted

Secretary

Sukumar Roy himself used to write such invitation letters though the letters did not bear his name. The name of the club was changed to ‘Monda Club’ (Monda – ‘sweets’) by the members.

After his father Upendra Kishore Roychowdhury’s death Sukumar Roy became the editor of the popular literary magazine ‘Sandesh’ and continued his literary activities a writer of comedies and comic verses. We need not mention that Sukumar Roy was a great magician in his coinage and selection of words in his nonsense verses—‘hāsjaru’, ‘hātimi’ etc. It is believed by some scholars that Sukumar Roy got the idea of use of such portmanteau words from his young friend Suniti Kumar.

**Dr. Chatterji’s appointment as a University Professor:** It has already been mentioned that in 1922 Chatterji was selected for a newly established chair in University of Calcutta – Khaira professor of Indian Linguistics.
This post was established along with some other chairs in Science, Literary subjects, Agriculture, Fine arts and so on with an endowment from Kumar Guruprasad Singh, popularly known as the Rajah of Khaira.

Soon after his return to Kolkata, Dr.Chatterji became seriously ill with pleurisy. Dr.Chatterji joined Calcutta University as a Khaira Professor in November 1922. He started taking classes in the Post Graduate Department in various subjects such as English, Bengali, Hindi, Urdu, Sanskrit and Comparative Philology.

It will be seen that this training, the educational and cultural atmosphere prepared the mind of Suniti Kumar as devoted scholar and a prolific writer. His wide range of interests and his socio-cultural studies as a philologist were to a great extent the results of his training and experiences of his early life.