CHAPTER FIVE

IN SEARCH OF A "HUMAN" SOCIETY

A STUDY OF THE STRANGE CASE OF BILLY BISWAS

The Strange Case of Billy Biswas is more explicitly and directly concerned with the theme of self and society than the other novels of Joshi, three of which have been discussed so far. Its concerns are both self and society, the relation between the two and an evaluation of both. Further its protagonist Bimal Biswas, affectionately called 'Billy' by all those known to him, is himself a most devoted student of anthropology engaged in a serious and systematic study of Man and society, primitive societies in particular. The study of anthropology involves not only an understanding of the aboriginalness of man but also the nature of society and the relationship that exists and ought to exist between man and society and the values governing both. It is also one of the great attempts of man to find himself. As a student of anthropology Billy is offbeat. He is no dry intellectual for whom human beings are laboratory specimens, nor a mere arm-chair academic, mopping up as a sponge information about primitive societies. While most other students of the subject including the bright ones would not only aim at achieving academic excellence but understandably look forward to prosperous career, academic or otherwise. Billy however aims at as complete an understanding of this fascinating subject as possible as well as tries to relate it to himself and his own life. He examines relentlessly its relevance to himself as an individual and to his interests and concerns as a social and human being. As a result, his entire outlook on men and matters and on life in general is deeply informed by his study of anthropology. It becomes his whole life. Thereby one who could have easily become a successful and distinguished academic personality, and prospered in life, chooses to become a primitive with open eyes risking the consequences. Billy is involved in society in a
manner that none of Joshi's other protagonists are, from whom he differs markedly. In fact, he is an unusual character even in Indian fiction in English in general.

It has already been noted in an earlier chapter that there is variety in Joshi's handling of the theme of self and society in his novels, and that each novel of his looks at it and probes it from a new and different angle, with its focus chiefly on the individual's relation to society. In *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (hereafter abbreviated to *The Strange Case*) the theme is studied by juxtaposing two sharply opposed societies with antithetical ways of life, values and culture. One of them is the civilised, sophisticated and westernised upper-class society of Delhi which the protagonist Billy belongs, and the other the primitive society of the tribals (the Gonds and Bhils) living in the interior hilly and forest areas of Central India, remote from centres of modern urban civilisation, into which Billy vanishes deliberately. Billy is dissatisfied and disillusioned with the westernised society of his birth and upbringing and its values and attitudes. He feels, lonely, isolated, and even alienated. Therefore he abandons it to join a remote tribal society in which he achieves enduring solidarity, both social and human. Phrased thus *The Strange Case* may seem to be all about 'primitivism versus civilization', with its bias in favour of the former. But it is not as simple as that, nor can it be reduced to such a neat formula. It is actually concerned with man's effort to find himself, his quest for his essential identity, for self-knowledge, values and meaning in life, and an "uncompromising quest for self's spiritual destination".\(^1\) The self and society dialectic is an aspect of this comprehensive theme.

*The Strange Case* has a very absorbing story to tell and that is one of its chief attractions. It is much better told and more tightly organised than either *The Foreigner* or
The Apprentice. In The Last Labyrinth, as seen in the previous chapter, the story interest is secondary, the focus being on what happens in the labyrinthine mind of Som Bhaskar. In The Strange Case the story interest is essential for the treatment of its several inter-linked themes. It tells indeed a 'strange' story and may appear incredible to the readers, particularly the urbanised and educated. May be to forewarn such readers and prepare them for the unusual in the novel, Joshi has inserted the word "strange" in the title itself. But more is suggested by the title than is apparent on the surface. Joshi always chooses meaningful titles to his novels. Before the special significance of the title of The Strange Case is examined, it seems necessary to know its story, at least in outline, to follow what is 'strange' in it.

Billy Biswas, who belongs to a well-connected family, is the only child and son of well-to-do parents, his father a Supreme Court Judge and at one time India's ambassador to one of the European countries, has his early education in Dehra Dun in India and England, where he acquires a distinct British accent. Later he goes to America ostensibly to study engineering but he actually studies anthropology without the knowledge of his father. It is a choice he makes on his own. This study becomes an all-absorbing passion and an obsession for him, and his entire life centres round primitivism. On returning home to India he finds himself lonely, isolated and alienated in the fashionable and westernised society of Delhi, the society of his birth and upbringing because he is revolted by its banality, superficiality, hollowness, spiritual sterility, and its philistine attitudes and money-centred values of life. He feels suffocated in this emotionally dehydrated, phoney society. Even then he struggles hard for a couple of years to adjust himself to its environment though acceptance of its false values is out of the question. Neither teaching anthropology
nor marriage, which he tries earnestly, helps matters. He has to live without a sense of community and communion. So with a seeming suddenness but actually after long debate within himself and deliberation he abandons the civilised world and disappears following an irresistible urge into the tribal world of the Maikala Hills in interior Madhya Pradesh. deserting once for all his aged parents, wife and son. He casts no backward glances and feels no regret. Among the tribals he finds the kind of society and human relations he has been longing for. The tribals too accept him as one among them. He marries a tribal woman and has a couple of children. He finds among the tribals a positive attitude to life, well-defined and solid, simple and profound at the same time. He finds his identity there. After much speculation about his disappearance from Delhi and careful investigation, it is concluded by the authorities at Delhi that he is dead, probably killed by a man-eater. Ten years later, during a period of acute drought, Billy who is now completely transformed into a tribal, unexpectedly contacts his friend Romesh Sahai (Romi who later narrates his story) who happens to be the district collector. Romi attempts to keep his discovery of Billy a closely guarded secret, because he wishes it, unfortunately fails miserably. Billy is literally hunted after by the state police force to capture him and bring him back to civilisation. But he gets killed in an attempt to escape. Thus his strange life comes to an abrupt tragic end.

The novel tells no ordinary story, as it moves on several planes. The wording of its title may make one expect a Perry Mason type of investigative story popularised by Earl Stanley Gardner, as it resembles the titles of Perry Mason stories. Superficially The Strange Case has several elements of such a story. The sudden disappearance of Billy, the frantic searches made for him, and later the efforts made to capture and bring him back to Delhi, have the popular fiction flavour of tracing a missing person. Again the manner in
which the novelist engages the reader's attention by giving him some glimpses of true facts about the protagonist, but withholding most of the essential ones to be revealed later and thus creating and sustaining suspense, also resembles the narrative method of detective fiction. However the title *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* seems to have been intentionally chosen by Joshi to alert the sensitive reader to the fact that in form, content, spirit and significance his novel may radically differ from those cases of detection and mystery.

The words "strange" and "case" in the title of the novel deserve to be looked at closely. Even the brief outline of Billy's story given above should indicate how strange and unusual it is. It would even appear to be utterly improbable and impossible. It is incredible that one who belongs to the upper stratum of the present-day Indian society and has everything in life to rouse one's envy – wealth, status, decent connections, a respectable job, affectionate parents, and a beautiful and loving wife – deliberately abandons them all to join a primitive tribe in a remote and inaccessible part of the country, marry a tribal woman, to live a life of privation, poverty, disease, and all the risks attendant on such a life among the uncivilised, who are perhaps savage. However compelling the urge be for taking this extraordinary and rash step, there is no denying that it is "strange". It would appear even stranger when more is known about Billy's life not merely among the tribals, his real motives, modes of thought and aspirations, and the tragic end he meets with finally.

To most people in Delhi other than those of his family circle, Billy's disappearance seems a most sensational event to gossip about for a time. And when the search for him is underway and official investigation is on, he becomes a "case". Ironically it falls to the lot
of Billy's own friend Romi Sahai, who as the district collector and magistrate gets involved in the investigation in unforeseen ways, to make finally a report on the "case" and forward it to the higher authorities. For the officials the intensely human story of Billy, his impassioned search for his identity, values and meaning in life, and for something beyond human life, becomes in the jargon of administration simply a "case" to be opened and disposed of. It is implied that for most people today the tragic story of Billy may not be anything more significant than a sensational case to be read about in newspapers and forgotten before long. But for those who were close to him, and knew intimately his unusual ways of thinking, his obsessions and urges, and his relentless pursuit of the goals he held in view to the ends of the earth as it were, not minding the perils he was running into, it is a story of profound sadness as well as of unrelieved wonder which teases them out of thought. On the manner in which Billy's case is disposed of, Romi, feeling bitter and helpless at the same time, remarks: "The strange case of Billy Biswas had at last been disposed of. It had been disposed of in the only manner that a humdrum society knows of disposing its rebels, its seers, its true lovers". Viewed thus the strange case of Billy Biswas is a far cry from the sensational cases handled by the trial lawyer Perry Mason.

To give the reader a clue regarding the thematic direction of the novel and the character of its protagonist, Joshi uses a line of verse as epigraph from Matthew Arnold's poem "Thyris" - "It irk'd him to be here, he could not rest". It is significant in so far as it points to Billy's dissatisfaction with his society and his going away from it on his own. Thyris of the poem does a similar thing. It is said of him that 'of his own will he went away'. "Thyris" is thematically a continuation of Arnold's earlier poem "The Scholar Gipsy" and presupposes it. The scholar is a felt presence in the later poem. Both are quest
poems whose protagonists are engaged in a quest for which they abandon their accustomed surroundings. They together with the speaker of “Thyrsis” form a unified image of a quester who takes the risk of going it alone, in spite of being misunderstood. Actually it is to the Gipsy Scholar rather than to Thyrsis that Billy is close, because of greater similarities between them. But there are differences too. The Scholar, a man of “pregnant parts and quick inventive brain” (ll. 33-34), actually leaves Oxford to join a band of wandering gipsies because he is denied “preferment”. Having joined the “wild brotherhood”, he wants to learn from their lore and their art of controlling others’ minds. In the second half of the poem Arnold, who derived the Gipsy Scholar’s story from Joseph Glanvil, progressively modifies his character and fashions him chiefly as a wandering quester who, repelled by the “strange disease of modern life / with its sick hurry, its divided aims” (ll.203-4), its materialistic values, and its lack of direction, wanders alone and away from society, waiting to catch “the spark from heaven” (l.120), which perhaps stands for some moment of illumination. It is not clear from the poetic context what is it that he seeks. Billy Biswas on the other hand is far more clear in his mind than either the Scholar Gipsy or Thyrsis about what he seeks. First of all he seeks a human society and finds it in a tribe where he is accepted as one among the tribals, it is hinted that he seeks something beyond, a spiritual reality, perhaps God, though characteristically he does not presume to name it. And then, the word “irked” is much too mild and inadequate to suggest what he goes through before he turns his back upon civilised society once for all, and disappears into the anonymity of tribal life. It follows that the similarities between The Strange Case and Arnold’s poems cannot be stretched too far.
In The Strange Case Joshi has a most challenging subject for fictive narration. On the face of it, Billy’s abandoning the smart society of the civilised world and all the comforts of life and assured promise of a prosperous career, all to join a primitive society in the back of beyond would appear to most readers as bizarre, regressive, and utterly unwise. Above all his experiences well before and after he goes primitive are so unusual that they fall far outside the pale of most people’s everyday experiences, they are apt to view them as fantastic, incredible and improbable. And Billy’s story taken in its outline may appear to be no more than a tall story. Billy’s American host while introducing him to Romesh Sahai who later tells his story, describes him as “Engineer, anthropologist, anarchist ... and thoroughly crazy, even by Indian standards”.

Therefore there are obvious difficulties for whoever tells his story to render it probable and convincing. Moreover Joshi has obviously chosen to tell this story because it has from his point of view particular significance and relevance for our times. It is therefore not enough if the story is told engagingly or render probable. The reader should be enabled to give it an intelligent and sympathetic attention, participate in imagination the organised experience it presents, assess it objectively and grasp its significance and relevance. Therefore it becomes imperative to devise a narrative strategy appropriate to this “strange” story.

Since it is Billy’s story, the story of his inward development and transformation, he himself could have been made to tell his story as an autobiographical narrative, as in the case of the protagonists of the other three novels of Joshi. But in view of its unusual components, his narration in all likelihood would have appeared onesided and therefore unconvincing. Even the third-person omniscient narration would not have served Joshi’s purpose. Billy’s story, which is one in a million and strange in the fullest sense of the term.
requires a narrator who is sensitive, intelligent, understanding, sympathetic and yet sufficiently sceptical and agnostic, and detached enough with no axe to grind, to present all the facts concerning the protagonist’s life especially the improbable ones faithfully and thus mediate between him and the reader so that the reader feels free to respond to the narrative and judge for himself the authenticity of the narrative.

To tide over the difficulties inherent in the story and present it without exaggeration or evasion, Joshi chooses Billy’s long-standing friend Romi as the internal dramatic narrator, and he could not have chosen better. Romi is Billy’s trusted and respected friend whose friendship has endured over the years in spite of the inevitable gaps in their contact and communication with each other. He is of Billy’s age, highly educated and widely travelled, and a sophisticated observer of men and matters. Because of his close association with Billy Romi has some first-hand knowledge of the working of his mind, his fads, fancies, idiosyncrasies and eccentricities, his passionate involvement in the study of anthropology and his preoccupation with primitive societies which he has studied with an extraordinary devotion. He is a witness to some of Billy’s strange experiences in America as well as India. Above all he is sensitive, intelligent, understanding, sympathetic, open minded, appreciative of Billy’s aspirations and values in life, and feels gravely concerned for his life when it is endangered. But at the same time he is agnostic enough to be a detached observer of his friend’s life and not sold on his strange ideas and beliefs, especially those which Billy acquires after becoming a primitive. However he keeps an open mind on issues which he cannot understand, and remains agnostic rather than dogmatic. In spite of his affectionate and deep concern for Billy, his level-headed rational
approach to life prevents him from becoming sentimental, and enables him to present a balanced account of his life, moving and objective at the same time.

As narrator Romi adheres to verifiable facts about Billy’s life. Chiefly he draws upon what he knows about him firsthand. But what he knows is limited in spite of his close association with him. He has no direct access to all of Billy’s thoughts and ideas in spite of his openness. There are some significant and crucial areas of his life about which Romi has no knowledge as they relate to his inner life, the inward tumult and confusion which began vaguely in his adolescence regarding his identity which he himself could not understand then, and which surfaced partly during his days in America and became so overpowering in India as to bring about his inner transformation and decide the course of his life and its destination. Later Billy himself was to shed light on this aspect of his life for the benefit of Romi. Instead of making surmises Romi fills the gaps in his knowledge of Billy’s life from impressions and information gathered from other sources. He reconstructs his friend’s life as faithfully and authentically as he can from what he knows of it of his own knowledge and from what he could gather from such other sources as Billy’s parents, his wife Meena, his tribal wife Bilasia, the tribal leader Dhunia, Rima Kaul the young girl who loved him with an unusual intensity although he was not aware of it at all, and above all from his Swedish friend Tuula Lindgren who provides an extraordinary insight into the workings of his mind which no one else could have. All these people are associated with Billy and know some facets of his personality. Romi carefully sifts the information he gathers for its correctness and authenticity before using it.
Billy’s experiences during the process of internal transformation and development have all the appearance of unreality and hallucinations. They are not only ‘strange’ but inarticulate and incommunicable. Only he who has gone through them can vouch for their reality and authenticity. They constitute Billy’s life. And the heart of the novel is in his abandoning the upper-upper crust society of Delhi and joining a primitive society. Only he knows his motives for taking such a drastic step and the forces that relentlessly propelled him towards such a life. Therefore the novelist makes Billy himself narrate the events of this crucial phase of his life to his friend Romi in a mood of retrospective recollection and confession. Romi for his part reports in a matter of fact manner Billy’s account as far as possible in his own words, as he does the conversations he has had with Billy’s parents, his father in particular, with Meena, Dhunia, Bilasia and Rima Kaul. He also incorporates relevant extracts from Billy’s letters to Tuula written from India during the critical years of his life before he took his crucial decision. In those letters Billy lays bare his dilemmas, misgivings, haunting dreams, and his groping efforts to find light. All these together give a rounded picture of Billy, and they also bring into the narrative many more voices than Romi’s. This strategy makes the story of Billy comprehensive and gives it the required impress of authenticity and verisimilitude.

Thus The Strange Case has a sort of braided narrative with two narrators. Romi as the chief narrator and Billy as the second and subordinate narrator. Part of the story is narrated by Romi and part by Billy who confines himself to that part of his life and experiences about which his friend has no knowledge. This strategy enables the reader to view Billy as seen by Romi (whose view converges on Billy’s view of himself in some respects and diverges from it in some others), and as he sees himself. Their views are
qualified or modified by the impression of Billy’s parents, his wife, Bilasia, Dhunia and other tribals, and Tuula. This narrative strategy renders credible the strange story of Billy and also conveys its relevance and significance. The story is told approximately in two parts. In the first Romi reconstructs his friend’s life from the time they got acquainted in New York to his sensational disappearance. This section is preliminary and outlines the early life of Billy, his parentage, education in England and America, his intellectual background, his impassioned involvement in the study of anthropology, his return to India, his marriage and his abrupt vanishing without trace from the Delhi society. This part of the narrative provides the background essential to what happens later. The second part covers the rest of Billy’s story. Many of the gaps in Romi’s knowledge of Billy’s life, before and after his going away, the actual circumstances that led to it, and all that happened between that time and his meeting Romi again after a decade are narrated by Billy himself. The last phase of Billy’s life in which he is hunted after and killed is narrated by Romi himself. Each narrator speaks from his point of view, and noteworthy, makes an effort to be as matter of fact as possible. The authenticity of the narration and its carrying conviction to the sceptical reader depends largely upon the character and integrity of each narrator. Romi in spite of his being involved in Billy’s life as both witness and participant keeps consistently the focus on his friend, whose story he tells. Further he can be self-critical and indulge in humour now and then at his own expense. He does not take himself or his gift for judgment for granted. It should be obvious by now that there is no linear narration in this novel as in the case of The Apprentice. Therefore the reader has to reconstruct for himself Billy’s life linearly.
It is as a retrospective narrative that Romi tells the story of Billy, sometime after his
death. It is as a mature man of considerable experience of life, and as a seasoned
administrator who has learnt to take a realistic and unillusioned view of men and matters
that Romi relates his friend’s story. Further the interval between the time of narration and
the actual events described, enables him to distance himself imaginatively from his subject
and look at it with some detachment, although his dead friend is very much alive in his
memory. Romi begins his narration with his nostalgically recalling an enigmatic song of
the Bhils which is playful and melancholic by turns. This song puts him in mind of his
dead friend Billy who too like the tribal song was an enigmatic personality. He was
difficult to understand and one of the most misunderstood. It is the tribal song that spurs
Romi on to tell the story of Billy, and incidentally it obliquely introduces into the narrative
the theme of primitivism. By explaining at the outset why he has set out to narrate his
friend’s story, Romi disarms the reader of any reservations he may have about his attitude
and approach to his subject:

If --- I propose to relate Billy’s story, it is not so much because I claim to
have understood him as it is on account of a deep and unrelieved sense of
wonder that in the middle of the twentieth century, in the heart of Delhi’s
smart society, there should have lived a man of such extraordinary
obsessions.  

Romi says further: “It is not so much the final resolution of his life that interest me as I am
intrigued by what preyed upon him during the course of it”. Billy sought doggedly and
with an abandon life’s meaning in the “dark mossy labyrinths of the soul” hidden from the
“dazzling light of the sun”, and pursued it “to its bitter end”. In narrating his friend’s life
Romi hopes to understand this strange man of extraordinary obsessions. In the first few
paragraphs of the novel the narrator, it may be said, sums up the essence of Billy's life, and his attitude to it.

The story proper begins with Romi's recalling fondly his first meeting with Billy in America at a party and his spending "a brief summer" with him in Harlem, the negro quarter of New York. From the moment of their chance acquaintance they strike a warm and spontaneous friendship which ripens and endures over the years. Incidentally, *The Strange Case* has been called an unusual love story. It may be remarked that it is also a story of an unusual friendship. While staying with Billy in his apartment, Romi closely observes, without consciously intending, several of his oddities, idiosyncracies, incongruities and eccentricities which set him apart from most Indians as well as others in America. To Romi's question why he had chosen to live in "one of the worse slums of New York", his disarming reply is that it "was the most human place he could find" in white America which "was much too civilized for him". Though he does not elaborate, it is his cryptic comment on American civilisation, which strikes him as much too dehumanised, and therefore by implication sterile, and materialistic to interest him. Despite the utter disarray of the tenement house in which he has his appalling apartment, he feels absolutely at home there with his Negro neighbours and makes Romi also feel quite at home there. In the midst of the clatter of pots and pans, the thumping of children, the raucous noise of the late afternoon he remains calm and poised.

Billy's preference for Harlem and his aversion to the civilised white America, his fascination for the "odd play" *Avocambo* [in which an educated man goes to the Congo and is "so incensed by the heat and the light and the primitive music" that he "starts killing
everybody” with his shot-gun], and his avid reading of the Playboy, give a glimpse into
his mind and his interest in things eerie, and hint at his interest in the primitive which
becomes more and more explicit as Romi gets to know him better. In view of his later
development, a comment Billy makes on the protagonist of Avocambo seems prophetic.
He says of the deranged mind of the hero who turns a savage killer, “very odd indeed,
although one can quite imagine something like that happening to oneself”. In anticipation,
it may be pointed out that Billy comes close enough to losing his mental balance not in the
tribal society he joins but in the smart and civilized society of Delhi. It may be added
further that when Billy makes his comment on Avocambo, probably he is conscious that
something strange is happening inside his own psyche which he cannot understand.

Romi also notices in Billy what would appear as an incongruity in Harlem, his
strong British accent, his soft cultivated voice, “poise without pose”, and his talking
without gestures. Later Romi learns that Billy had his education for some years in England
where he acquired these qualities, when his father was away as an ambassador in one of the
European countries. For a close observer of Billy like Romi there are many more things in
him that are incongruous in one of his class, upbringing and education. He laughed and
bantered but his eyes remained “serious” and never lost “their deep sombre looks”. Few, if
any, noticed the “dark depths” in his eyes. Apart from his erudite interest in anthropology,
many of his other interests; virtually a medley, must have appeared crazy and bizarre to
Romi until he got to know him better: black magic and witchcraft, pornography, Jazz
music (which was constantly played), life of the Dutch painter Van Gogh (which was full
of pain, sorrow and despair), crime reports in newspapers, and old issues of the National
Geographic Magazine, the theory of relativity, etc.
In answer to Romi's question what drew him to anthropology, when he was expected to study engineering, Billy's candid, humble and hesitant reply is: "I don't really know, I am afraid. What I do know is that this is what I have always wanted to read --- All I want to do in life is to visit the places they (ie the books on anthropology) describe, meet the people who live there, find out about the aboriginalness of the world". And his ambition was to travel, particularly in India and visit the many "fascinating societies" (obviously tribal) that exist there. His "passionate involvement" with anthropology and his staggering range of knowledge impress Romi, who gradually realises that "it was around his interest in the primitive man that his entire life had been organized". Far from being a love of the curious, novel and strange, his interest in the primitive man was a passion overriding every other interest to penetrate deep into human life, individual and collective, as he was not content with the mere surface reality.

Billy's bongo drums session in his Negro friend George's room gives Romi a glimpse into the depths of his labyrinthine soul. Billy's performance, not very skillful or sophisticated, had "a mesmeric pull" which held everyone present there "by its sheer vitality". It seemed to carry a "fundamental message" though none could have said what it was. The packages of sound of the drums "brought into the room a reality that had not been there before". Billy himself looked like one who having been transported into a different world had returned from a long difficult journey. From time to time Billy experiences such feelings of unreality which profoundly influence his understanding of people who lived outside the orbit of modern civilisation and the world outside. Romi senses that there is something unusual about Billy but what it is he is not able understand.
It is Billy’s Swedish friend Tuula Lindgren who helps Romi to understand this strange aspect of his mind and personality. She has a better and closer knowledge of Billy as she has known him longer and shares with him certain common interests, especially India’s tribal people. Her advanced training in psychiatric social work enables her to have a reliable understanding of minds which appear non-normal. Therefore she has a real insight into Billy. She detects in him the presence of “a great force, urkraft, --- a primitive force” which is responsible for some of his unusual ways. It is her understanding that Billy, who is half aware of this primitive force in him, is afraid of it and is trying to suppress it. She fears that it may “explode any time”. She intuits and hints to Romi that there may come a day when Billy might need his help because of the urkraft in him. When in America Romi had seen more than once this primitive force manifested itself in Billy. It was very much in evidence during his bongo drums session. It is only some years after their return to India that he realises how irresistibly decisive is its impact on Billy.

In fact Romi learns from Billy himself, during his retrospective account of his life to him when they meet long after Billy became a primitive, how even as an adolescent of fourteen he had experienced this force in Bhubaneswar during a brief holiday. In that small town, where one ran into adivasis everywhere, “a slumbering part” of him had “suddenly come awake”. He felt excited and troubled at once by a sudden interest in his own identity: “Who was I? Where had I come from? Where was I going?” He felt the presence of a spirit “that lurked about the place soaking everything in a magical glow”, a spirit, as he was to learn much later, “a much, much older force, older than the time when man first learned to build temples”, about which only the adivasis knew. And during the nocturnal entertainment of the tribals in Bhubaneswar, he experienced “a great shock of
erotic energy” passing through him which was “followed by the same feeling of unreality or --- a reality sharper than any (he) had ever known”. He said to himself: “Something has gone wrong with my life. This is where I belong. This is what I have always dreamt of”.

This experience brought him his first intimation of the primitive self in him. Further it is even more significant because it clearly anticipates the later Billy who not only becomes passionately involved in tribal life and society but ceaselessly quests for his identity and meaning in life. In one of his letters to Tuula written from Delhi some time after his return to India, Billy phrases much more precisely than the ever could as a boy, his dilemmas and his agonizing quest for his identity:

It seems --- that we are swiftly losing what is known as one’s grip on life.

Why else this constant blurring of reality? Who am I? Who are my parents? My wife? My child? At times I look at them, sitting at the dinner table, and for a passing moment I cannot decide who they are or what accident of Creation has brought us together.

These eternal questions have profound philosophical implications to the Hindu mind, and are not restricted to primitive life only. That going primitive was not the ultimate end for Billy and that he sought “something else” beyond it, and “becoming a primitive was only a first step, a means to an end”¹⁸ is revealed by Billy himself to Romi years later in the course of their conversation.

Billy does not fit into the highly civilised American society though he has stayed there for four years, because it is not human enough for him and he does not find there the values of life he cherishes most in society. At the same time the pull of the urkraft in him becomes very strong, and hallucinatory experiences – the kind of experience he had in
Bhubaneswar years ago – recur frequently, his study of anthropology giving impetus to such “lapses”. He has “the same odd feeling of being in a place other than where (he) was, in a place very, very old, at times a wilderness, at other times full of strange primitive people”. Invariably after each experience he feels shaken up, and he is left “with the old depressing feeling that something had gone wrong with (his) life. (He) wasn’t where (he) belonged”. And therefore he itches to be back home, to return to India. He fondly hopes that a return to Delhi, and to the solidarity and security of the close-knit family-fold, may set things right for him and free him from his apprehensions. As the feeling of being shaken up persists even after his return, in a great hurry he gets married to Meena Chatterjee, beautiful, convent educated and westernised, daughter of a retired civil servant. Billy’s explanation to Romi about his hasty marriage reveals the abnormal state of mind he was in at that time: “--- I had grown terribly afraid of myself, some part of me, I thought terrible things might happen unless I did something drastic --- the only that I could think of was to get married. It was like an insurance taken out on my normalcy”.20

Virtually all of Billy’s hopes and expectations of his homecoming are grossly disappointed. He returns to Delhi “to experience only a change of scene with the reality remaining almost the same as in America”, says Tapan Ghosh.21 But actually it is far worse because Billy is among his own people, his own family and society, and yet from all of them he feels isolated and estranged inwardly. He is visibly unhappy, especially after his marriage with Meena. His parents are, without a doubt, very well meaning, affectionate and loving, but they are hardly interested in his pursuits though they do not make any demands on him. His marriage, ill-conceived and decided in haste, is doomed to failure from the start, partly due to clash of temperaments, but mostly due to Meena’s failure to understand Billy and his failure to establish communication with her. Their attitudes to
life, expectations and values, are sharply opposed. Had Meena, according to Billy, "possessed a rare degree of empathy or even a sufficient idea of human suffering", their marriage "might have been saved". But "her upbringing, her ambitions, twenty years of contact with a phoney society - all had ensured that she should not have it". So the more he "tried to tell her what was corroding (him) bringing (him) to the edge of despair --- the more resentful she became". Whatever he told her "got distorted" in her mind as a complaint against her.22

Billy finds that there is none outside home too with whom he can communicate, and who can show a measure of understanding of his predicament, the only two people, Tuula and Romi who have some understanding of his strange personality, being away. In one of his letters to Tuula, he writes cryptically: "To speak, I am afraid, is to address the deaf".23 Billy feels lonely even in his teaching profession. Dr. Shenoy who heads the Department of Anthropology, neither knows enough of the subject nor does he understand or appreciate Billy's total involvement in it. The academic environment itself suffocates him. His outburst to Romi, "Who gives a damn about books around here?"24 is enough comment on it. In extenuation of the inability or failure of his people, his wife in particular, it has to be said that his ways of thinking and feeling being so out of the way, and his enthusiasms seemingly so bizarre that it requires enormous effort to take a tolerant view of them. Even his father, Biswas Senior, a sedate and sober man, is puzzled by his son's enthusiasm for anthropology, his idiosyncratic view of the Krishna murder case which involved human sacrifice and its implications for law and justice, and his belief in the existence of "worlds at the periphery of this one, above it and below it, and around it, of which we know nothing until we are in them".25
By nature Billy is very sociable, unassuming, unpretentious (in spite of intellectual interests and staggering range of knowledge which impresses even Romi), and friendly. He is capable of spontaneous warmth. As a social being, not merely as a student of anthropology, he has a deep need to share, to help, to feel as a member of a society, and desires to belong to it. But he is greatly disillusioned as all that he hoped for and looked forward to are belied by the aristocratic upper-upper crust of Delhi society to which his family belongs, from which he himself sprang and in which he was brought up. He feels like a fish out of water there. In fact, he cannot feel at home in any society which seems to him ultra-civilised, be it in America or in India. For him it is a dehumanised society, and his strongest strictures and his strident criticism are directed against it, although he reveals them only to Tuula and Romi. From his point of view, this is a shallow anglicised society, superficial in its glitter. It is shamelessly and blindly imitative of the West. It has lost its sense of tradition and its life-giving and enhancing values. It has become wholly materialistic in its outlook. It has no roots and no spiritual anchor. Therefore it has become spiritually sterile and degenerating. Intellectually it is bankrupt, emotionally barren, and its tastes are cheap, philistine and deplorable. Such a society can have only a corrupting, degrading and dehumanising influence on its members.

In his retrospective account of his life before he abandoned the Delhi society for the tribal world, Billy explains to Romi what really got on his nerves there so much as to make him indignant:

What got me was the superficiality, the sense of values. I don't think all city societies are as shallow as ours --- I don't think I have ever met a more pompous, a more mixed-up lot of people. Artistically, they were dry as
dust. Intellectually, they could no better than mechanically mouth ideas that the West abandoned a generation ago. Their idea of romance was to go and see an American movie or go to one of those wretched restaurants and dance with their wives to a thirty-year old tune. Nobody remembered the old songs, or the meanings of the festivals. All the sensuality was gone. So was the poetry. All that was left was loud-mouthed women and men in three-piece suits dreaming their little adulteries --- The only thing I could see them worrying about was Money: Why couldn’t they make more of it ---

The passage above is long. But it has been worth citing almost in full, because it makes explicit his predicament arising out of his bi-cultural situation.

In a letter to Tuula in a gloomy and bitter mood, written probably a year after his return from America, Billy gives his impression of a typical gathering of men and women of his class:

I see a roomful of finely dressed men and women seated on downy sofas and while I am looking at them under my very nose they turn into a kennel of dogs yawning (their large teeth showing) or snuggling against each other or holding whisky glasses in their furred paws.27

The canine imagery in this passage reflects vividly the extent of revulsion at his society and its false values. In another letter to her he wonders “whether civilisation is anything more than the making and spending of money”. And all the activities of the civilised world seem to him to be hung “on the peg of money”.28 His letters to Tuula show his concern for individuals, society and civilisation, and also for himself. He is greatly disappointed with his wife Meena because, among other things, of her attachment to money. He “cannot
imagine (her) doing something that did not make money”. In sharp contrast to her is Tuula who treats money as “a whole lot of paper” and nothing more. Bilasia the tribal woman whom Billy marries after becoming a tribal, is like her in her “total disregard of money”. His detestation of cheap and vulgar imitation of the West is so intense that it brought him once close to cancelling his engagement to Meena. Having agreed to join her and her friends in a picnic, he went to her place. He was infuriated to find there “some ten-year old American pop record braying like an ass fit to burst and two of her silly cousins clapping their hands and wiggling their hips as if that was the greatest music in the world”. His comment to Romi on this episode is, “That certainly wasn’t the India that I had come back for”.31

If a man of Billy’s temperament and attitudes felt estranged from his family and society, there is nothing surprising in it. But Billy’s own experience is far worse because he is estranged from these and even from his essential self in the environs of his upper-class society. Romi, who visits Billy some three years after his marriage, is taken aback to find the devastating change wrought in him within a few years after his return home from America. The Billy he sees now is a complete contrast to the Billy he knew since their New York days:

Billy --- had changed almost beyond recognition. He had put on weight ---

He was dressed in a very expensive suit. His conversation was nonchalant,

at times almost rude. When he drank he showed it.32

One who was a live wire, now “seemed duller than most dull men”. He is listless: “It was as though some part of him had gone on strike --- Gone was the staggering intelligence, the spectroscopic interests, the sense of humour --- the Billy Biswas (he) had known was
finished, snuffed out like a candle left in the rain". \( ^{33} \) (emphasis added). How total is his alienation may be known from this change in Billy noticed by Romi. It is not clear to him what went wrong with Billy until he himself explains to him ten years later, under the shadows of the unfinished temple of the tribals.

It is in this context that the Rima Kaul episode – his seducing her – becomes enormously significant. It brings to the sharpest focus the corrupting, degrading and dehumanising influence of this phoney society on Billy in spite of his stiff resistance to it. It crystallised for him the extent of the corrosion in his soul and the depths to which he had fallen. As a result it led him to his final decision to escape from the stranglehold of his decadent society and disappear into the primitive world. Billy himself explains briefly to Romi in his confessional narration. The significance of this episode, although even the mere recollection of it touches him at a very sensitive spot and fills him with shame and contempt, because what he did was, from his point of view, "a terrible thing" and "a sordid business". \( ^{34} \) It was "a warning signal" of what would happen to him if he did not "break away from this filth". \( ^{35} \) He also saw in it a grim reminder to him of his "responsibilities towards (his) soul". \( ^{36} \) As he explains to Romi, much more than the act itself the "way" and "why" he did it, fills him with "contempt" "forever", and even at this distance of time it can "keep (him) awake the whole of a night". It is appropriate to adduce here Billy’s own words of explanation, for they are remarkable for their clarity, candour, restraint, and freedom from melodrama:

After it was over I looked into her clear trusting eyes, and I had a first glimpse of my degradation. I realized what a cad I had been, and what a fraud I was about to become. I didn’t even love her --- The mendacity that
I had seen all around me had finally grabbed hold of me. I was well on my way to becoming all that I had always despised --- It gradually dawned on me that a tremendous corrupting force was working on me. It was as though my soul were taking revenge on me for having denied it so long that Other Thing that it had been clamouring for ---

What the “Other Thing” which was beckoning Billy may be considered later in the context of his life as a tribal, because he himself realised its compulsive importance only after he rejected the civilised society in favour of the primitive and tribal which was preoccupying him at the time.

Long before the Rima Kaul episode takes place to bring matters to a head in Billy’s life, the great primitive force, urkraft, in him remains vigorously active causing him enormous psychic disturbance. The shrewd Tuula had detected its strong presence in him and tried to caution Romi about it. The more Billy suppresses it or delays listening to the call of this inner voice, the more urgent does it become for him to acknowledge it. The two extracts from his letters to Tuula written from India which Romi quotes give an unmistakable hint of the turmoil in him. In the first he says that when he returns from an anthropological expedition, for days he cannot shake off “the sounds and smells of the forest”, and that “the curious feeling” trails him wherever he goes that he is “a visitor from the wilderness to the marts of the Big City and not the other way round”. The other extract is even more disturbing. It is about his seeing in his dreams “a strange woman”, at various places, on the streets of Delhi, under the shade of tree, at a tribal dance, or in a fair, in Benares beside a tank, and on a siding in one of the ports. “This woman”, Billy writes, “keeps crossing my dreams causing in me fearful disturbance, the full of meaning of which
I have yet to understand". Romi is not aware of Billy's inner struggles. But he catches on his face more than once a clear "stamp of sorrow", "a tortured, almost haggard expression" which is "a mixture of nearly all those emotions that one tends to associate with a great predicament". Though Romi feels concerned, he does not connect it with the active urkraft in Billy. In view of later developments, this expression on his face, his letters to Tuula, and his strange and unpredictable behaviour, and the strains in his married life, all these seem premonitory.

Billy’s involvement with Rima Kaul is a consequence of his isolation and estrangement from his family and society. She happens to be the only person who cares to listen to him with sympathy, although how much of his inner turmoil she really understands is doubtful. Self-pity colours whatever he tells her about himself. He begins to whine, lie, sham and play-act before her, and do all those things which he despised in his society to retain her sympathy, although it is all unnecessary as she is head over heels in love with him. But once he becomes conscious of the despicable levels to which he has degraded himself, he has to pay heed to the warning signal of his conscience, and choose between the only two alternatives before him: either continue to live in the same corrupting and dehumanising society and perish or abandon it altogether and seek a different and revitalising society in which he can live a meaningful life after his heart, in accordance with the values he has cherished, and thus protect and preserve his personal integrity and humanity. He tells Romi "I could either follow this call, this vision, whatever the cost, or be condemned to total decay"."
Billy takes the plunge, turns his back upon the civilised society he has been in since his birth, and seeks a remote primitive tribal society. The choice he makes is "drastic" and he is fully conscious of it, as he admits to Romi. But he is all for such a choice, though most difficult for him to make it. As member of a close-knit family, he has strong familial ties and values them. None of the other protagonists has such familial bonds. Sindi has no family at all, Ratan has only a routine and an almost mechanical relationship with his wife and daughter. Som is indifferent to his family. Billy, on the other hand, is deeply attached to his parents, his son, and even to his wife even though he is increasingly disappointed with her. And it is a terrible wrench for him to desert them. He takes this tremendous leap after months of silent inner tension and struggle. His actual disappearance is not a planned or pre-meditated act, as he explains to Romi: "I had no idea it was going to happen. It was two days — and two nights — before I knew what I had done. By then it was too late". It is also not a rash or arbitrary act done on a moment's impulse. Actually it is the culmination of a long process over the years which began way back in his adolescence when he was at Bhubaneswar, and gathered strength and momentum as he grew older and became passionately involved in the study of anthropology. The urkraft in him becomes so active and insistent that during his last anthropological expedition he cannot resist any longer the call of the forest and primitive life. He abandons his students and disappears dramatically without leaving any trace. Therefore the view of R.K. Dhawan and O.P. Bhatnagar that Billy's decision to leave the civilised world is 'sudden', is not tenable.

Billy himself gives Romi a vivid but unexaggerated and unsentimental account of how it all happened. He narrates in a flat matter-of-fact tone. He is neither apologetic
nor does he justify himself, as he is fully convinced of the rightness of his action. But when he reaches in his narrative the crucial moments of his transformation, his metamorphosis, and the traumatic experience he went through, it seems to Romi that his friend pauses every now and then to find the right words to communicate the incommunicable. But he realises that actually the pauses were part of Billy's attempt "to adjust his point of view to that which he considered to be (Romi's) so that he could communicate better".47

Along with his students Billy arrives at the place of their investigative study, Dhunia's village. At the time of erecting their tents it is found that the package containing most of the ropes is missing. Therefore Billy goes to Dhunia's village to fetch some rope. He has to wait there for Dhunia's niece Bilasia to arrive to give him the rope. From this moment of waiting for her till he decides irrevocably to stay with the tribals, for two days and two nights, he has to go through the severest test of his life. When Billy met Bilasia last, a couple of years ago, she was a sick girl. But now she has regained her health fully and fills the entire hut with her voluptuous presence. She makes an immediate and terrific impact on Billy during this encounter with her. He describes it to Romi thus:

--- quite suddenly and unaccountably I had ceased to resist what was the real me. All that I had been confusedly driving towards all my life had been crystallized, brought into focus --- by what I had been through during the interval between this visit and the time I had first met Bilasia. I had changed --- But more than that, I knew that I was very near the brink --- I knew I could go over the brink any day now, any moment, and I was terrified. God, I was terrified. I had never been so terrified in life.48
Back at the camp he is apprehensive of what is going to happen to him. He even weeps like a child. The call of the primitive world becomes more articulate and strident. The entire forest, the moonlit night, the many and varied objects of nature, all call him to join them and be with them. They all seem to be waiting, watching and staring at him, as though he is not Bimal Biswas, the only son of a Supreme Court Judge, husband of Meena, and father of a handsome child, “but the first man on earth facing the earth’s first night”.

The wind in the leaves, the little insects in the under bush, the water trickling over the rocks, all beckon to him and say, “Why do you want to go back? This is all there is on earth. This and the woman waiting for you in the little hut --- you thought New York was real. You thought New Delhi was your destination. How mistaken you have been! Mistaken and misled.

Come now, come ---”

No wonder that Billy fears that he is losing his sanity. He undergoes a “deep metamorphosis” in him. “Layer upon layer (is) peeled off (him) until nothing but (his) primitive self is left trembling”. All the accumulated and hardened crust of civilised life is removed. This experience which rudely shakes him up, is similar to his Bhubaneswar experience but far more overpowering because he understands its full significance. The next morning Billy feels more or less “normal”. He gives his boys a detailed briefing on the area of their study. But in the middle of his instruction, he starts having the very odd sensation that he is a tribal himself, “one of the primitives to be investigated and not one of the investigators”. This feeling becomes so strong that he “almost (breaks) into the local dialect” giving his listeners “a highly subjective version of himself that any primitive man” would give. He does not know what is going to happen to him, and tells himself to be careful.
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After lunch lying on his camp-bed Billy reads through a couple of magazines including an old copy of The New Yorker. As he leafs through them “the whole thing, hallucination or whatever it was” haunting him since his meeting with Bilasia, “miraculously” seems to clear up. He feels an “utterable” sense of relief and cautions himself not to let his imagination run away. And he hugs the magazines gratefully “as though they (are) talismans, certificates of (his) normalness”. They symbolise for him the world of his birth and upbringing. He feels so much reassured that he thinks that he could never be as at home anywhere as (he is) with these editorials. He tries to convince himself of the undesirability of Dhunia’s world. He “clutches at this straw with both hands”. But the straw itself breaks in a couple of hours. By the evening Billy’s self-confidence begins to ebb. As the sun sets the hallucination returns “in an overwhelming flood”. The loud beats of the tribal drums reach his ears. Their continuous rhythm has a mesmeric pull which he cannot resist. He leaves the camp and heads for Dhunia’s hut, his excitement acquiring a solid and devastating form. He joins the large crowd of tribals gathered in a clearing of the jungle, and like them expectantly waits for the rising of the moon, as never before, as if it is “the very reason for being present on the earth that night”. In former days he “waited for degrees, for lectures, for money, for security, for a middle-class marriage, for the welfare of his child, for preserving the dignity of his family, for being just, for being well dressed, and for being normal and for all those things that civilized men count as their duty or the foundation of their happiness or both”. All these different kinds of waiting seem meaningless to him, as he waits for the moon as if in a trance. Now he has “the first terrible premonition that he might not go back”.

The longed for moon rises and it is immediately followed by the orgiastic dance of the tribal men and women. As Billy, "a refugee from civilization", watches them, he undergoes "his final metamorphosis", getting down to his unadulterated primitive self. Later that night he joins Bilasia, whose "enormous eyes --- poured out a sexuality that was nearly as primeval as the forest". She too calls out to him, "Come, come, come". Desire is much too mild a word to describe his extraordinary feelings and the explosion of his senses. As he puts it, "It was closer to madness, the terrible madness of a man who after great sin and much suffering finally finds himself in the presence of his god". He feels that he has suddenly discovered in her "that bit of himself that he has searched for all his life and without which his life is nothing more than the poor reflection of a million others". She appears to him to be his missing self, and union with her makes him whole. In her he finds at the moment of their union "the essence of that primitive force that (has) called (him) night after night, year after year". She symbolises for him, as Srinath says, "the untapped subterraneous resources of psychic energy". She enlivens his soul as neither Meena nor even Rima Kaul could have. "She plays", as Tapan Ghosh says, a momentous role in Billy's life by helping him to know himself, and to realise his own potentialities.

Some critics of Joshi, notably R.S. Pathak and Tapan Ghosh, see the Sankhyan idea of the union of Prakriti (Matter, Primordial Nature) and Purusha (soul) suggested in the union of Bilasia and Billy. As Pathak says, "Once the Purusha comes into communion with the Prakriti, he is capable of realising all his potentialities, and though remaining in the most complete passivity, of attaining godhood". Tapan Ghosh says of Bilasia that she "represents the Feminine principle of the Sankhya system which postulates two ultimate realities -- Purusha (self) and Prakriti (Primordial Nature) and the manifestation and
evolution of the human spirit in the union of the two”. This interpretation of the Billy-Bilasia relationship may find support in the fact that Gargi the deaf-mute spiritual mentor in *The Last Labyrinth*, considered in the previous chapter, advises Som that he should be guided by Anuradha who is his “Shakti”. Arun Joshi’s own interest in the spiritual heritage of India and his deep concern about the predicament of the post-independence generations which seem to have lost their spiritual moorings, lend support to such an approach to the novel. However the deep human interest that this novel as well as *The Last Labyrinth* has, would be missed if the Sankhyan element in either is overemphasised. In *The Strange Case*, the narrative is more immediately concerned with what happens to Billy Biswas in the tribal society in which he decides to stay.

It is quite clear from what Billy says that it was not Bilasia’s sensuality that lured him to her. Something far more powerful and indescribable was involved. It is worthwhile knowing how Bilasia appears to Romi who sets his eyes on her for the first time three months after he redisCOVERS Billy and a few hours before he is shot dead:

She was not young anymore when I saw her. She had two children. The harsh realities of the environment, both nature’s and man-made, had also left their mark. And yet --- I had little difficulty in imagining what she might have been ten years earlier. She had that untamed beauty that comes to flower only in our primitive people. It was as though nature were cocking a snook at the Meena Biswases of the world, informing them once again how little it cared for their self-proclaimed superiority. --- where else could be found that proud carriage, a figure so graceful, eyes whose brightness made
your pulse quicker. Where else had I ever seen a grief so tragic that it
might well have brought tears to the eyes of a stone-god —
Romi sees in her all the elemental forces combined:

What was Bilasia? What is the playful effervescence of a mountain stream?
What is sunlight filtering through a glade? What is the thunder of a volcano
or the hardness of a granite? What is the vengeance of a cobra whose mate
has been killed? —
There is nothing surprising, feels Romi, in such a woman affecting profoundly a man of
Billy’s sensibilities.

After this “enormous volte face” in his life, Billy learns gradually to stabilize
himself and settle down in the primitive society which he joins of his own free will and
choice, not because of any “forces of darkness” as supposed by Dhawan. The tribal
society accepts him as one among them readily and wholeheartedly. But it is no easy task
for him, especially after the trauma of cutting himself off from the thirty years of his past, to
establish himself in the new place where he really wants to be. In this process Bilasia, his
tribal wife (not his “mistress” as Dhawan characterises her), helps him more than any one
else. She leaves him to himself whenever he wants to be left alone. Her total disregard
of money, and complete absence of ambition — “no ambition none at all” — in her and a
similar absence of it in him, contribute to their harmonious relationship. Billy is very
explicit on this aspect of their relationship:

We lived at the subsistence level. What kept us happy — were the same
things that have kept all primitives happy through the ages, the liquor from
the mahua, and, more than anything else, no ambition, none at all.
Billy makes himself useful to the tribe in several ways. He helps Dhunia's cousin in whatever farming there is. He actively participates in all the activities of the tribe and shares its sorrows and joys. He is held in very high esteem by the entire tribe. Quite sometime before he joined the tribe, Dhunia had become his "mahaprasad". A "mahaprasad" is "the greatest friend" that one could make on earth, for whom one would "gladly die", because Billy had given his niece who was ill some antibiotics "which probably saved her life". Mahaprasad is a mutual relationship. Billy's admission into the tribe is probably due to the service he rendered it. Not only Dhunia but all the others in the tribe become his friends. In course of time he becomes for them their priest and magician. They are convinced that he is the reincarnation of one of their ancient kings who was also a great sculptor. He was poisoned to death by his jealous brothers. His queen, Devi, "immolated herself on her husband's pyre, prophesying that she would return when her husband returned to the forest. And at her return Chandtola would glow again on moonlit nights". That this prophesy has come true is proved by the fact that Chandtola, the whitefaced cliff of one of the hills, has started to glow once again as it did thousands of years ago, since the arrival of Billy. It is from Devi Mata who has taken abode in Chandtola that Billy derives his magical powers.

Among the many miracles which Billy has performed with his magical powers, according to Dhunia, are his sending away never to return the man-eater which was a regular menace to the tribe, and his bringing back Dhunia's grandson who was believed to be dead. Billy however laughs away these miracles attributed to him. His explanation to Romi about the tiger is that he and the tiger stood looking at each other for half a minute and afterwards it "got up and went away, wagging his tail". As for bringing Dhunia's
grandson back to life from death, the boy who was bitten probably by a harmless snake, was
not really dead at all. All that he did was to apply to the wound a herb called *chaullai*
(*Amarantus Gangeticus*), the right antidote for the poison, about which and a few other
medicinal herbs he had learnt from the tribal medicine-man. There is nothing miraculous
in his predicting rainfall and the end of drought, by following the direction of certain stars in
the sky. For ages, before the advent of technology, people were guided by the stars in
several matters including rainfall. Very probably Billy did acquire certain psychic powers
of healing along with the knowledge of herbal medicines. Later he cures Romi’s wife Situ
of a chronic and painful migraine out of sheer concern for his friend and his wife.
Unfortunately this very human gesture leads to others getting to know about his being alive,
and subsequently to his death at the hands of the police. Characteristically Billy makes light
of his role as “magician” of the tribe. He reluctantly admits to being “some sort of a priest”
to the tribe. Even this he regards as unimportant. On Romi’s insistence he unwillingly
accepts that he helps the tribals with “their difficulties, their health and food and social
disputes and spiritual troubles”. The words in the quotes are actually Romi’s, and Billy
merely concurs with them. All that he says is “It is amazing how unhappy everyone really
is, even here”. In all these one notices Billy’s natural tendency towards self-effacement.
What he means to the tribal people is summed up by Dhunia: “He looks after us; he is our
priest --- He is like rain on parched lands, like balm on a wound. These hills have not seen
the like of him since the last of our kings passed away”.

Now arises the question, “What gains does Billy really make by becoming a
primitive and joining a tribal society, abandoning for ever his own?”, because the price he
has had to pay is undoubtedly very heavy. He must have obviously been greatly benefited
because he does not regret the step taken, nor does he cast any nostalgic backward glances at what he has renounced. It is true that some three months after he joined the tribe, during which he was trying to adjust himself to the changed environment, he wanted to return and even obtained permission from the tribe. But it was not because of any disappointment with the tribe or the life in it. He felt “guilty” about what he had done to his people: “I knew I had been pretty brutal as far as my family was concerned.” Having walked as far as the temple in ruins on his way to Delhi, he could not go beyond and retraced his steps to the tribal village, as if he was destined to remain and end as a tribal there.

Billy has always valued society and he finds in the primitive tribe the kind of society he has looked forward to; a close-knit community of people of mutual respect and concern, of human relations free from the kind of hypocrisy, pretence, self-centred acquisitiveness, possessiveness, and ambition which he saw everywhere in the civilised westernised society he gave up for good. There is nothing “phoney” about this society. Its music, song and dance are its own, springing directly from and inseparably related to the life of the tribe, and not cheap imitations of some outmoded American pop. Its values are its own, life-giving and meaningful, and not the superficial pseudo-western values of the aristocratic upper-crust society from which he came. It is a society in which man and nature live in close relationship. Billy feels regenerated and revitalised. He no longer feels lonely, isolated and estranged from those around him, as he did in his pre-tribal phase. There are not any more hallucinations, haunting dreams and nightmares to keep him anguished. He is no longer in any hurry. His earlier restlessness yields place to a profound serenity of mind. He feels absolutely at home with himself and with the community. He has all the freedom
to be himself. He recovers the integrity of his self and experiences a sense of wholeness. He is spiritually revived.

It is important to note that Billy does not accept or share all the beliefs and superstition of the tribals, though never once does he feel superior to them. He is sceptical about the love-magic that Bilasia is supposed to have done on him. He does not at all accept the tribal view that he is the reincarnation of their sculptor king, though he appreciates the significance and beauty of the tragic myth of the king. If the tribals believe that the temple was built fifty thousand years ago, he knows that it is only a few centuries old. If Dhunia had not told Romi about Billy’s being the priest and magician of the tribe, he would not have known at all, because Billy on his own does not allude to these roles he plays. Even more significant in the fact that in spite of the position, prestige, and influence he enjoys he never takes advantage of the susceptibilities of the tribals. In this regard he is the very opposite of Kurtz of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Having become a primitive and enjoying an exalted position among the tribals, Kurtz degenerates fast to become one of the worst egotists, and gets rites performed by the tribals in his honour as to a good. He has only contempt for them, and becomes a 'hollow man'.

The primitive tribal mode of life, attitudes and values together provide for Billy a congenial environment to pursue his quest for the meaning and purpose of life. This quest gets extended to “seek something else”, which he hesitates to call God, because “that is too big a word”. He realises that becoming a tribal is not the end of his efforts, but only “a first step”, a “means” to seeking “That Other Thing”, only after he runs away from the civilised society into the tribal society. While he gladly identifies himself with the tribe and is
happy to be one among the tribals, Billy has no romantic or illusory notions about tribal society. He does not take a simplest view of it. He is only too well aware of its privations, poverty, disease, and other limitations. He is also aware of the weakness of the tribals. Its primary value for him is that it is a human and not a humdrum society.

The primitive world is made actual and credible in the novel, as something substantial and solid with a well-defined concept of life, as Tapan Ghosh remarks. It may seem that in The Strange Case, apparently, there is an upholding if not a celebration of the primitive as against the civilised. Hence questions such as, "What is Billy’s considered attitude to civilized society of which he is critical", and "What is the author’s own attitude to the issue" arise. It would be incorrect to identify Billy with his creator. In the polarisation of the primitive and the civilised, the latter seems to lose. To put it differently, Bilasia wins over Meena Biswas. But a closer look at the novel reveals that the issue is not resolved in such simple terms.

Interest in the primitive generally has its origin in one’s dissatisfaction with urban civilisation, and anguished awareness of its dehumanising artificiality, sophistication and complexities, and one’s misgivings about the values it fosters. In contrast the primitive seems natural, simple and free from the ills of civilisation. Therefore one is drawn to it and tempted to escape into supposed natural and simpler modes of living, free from the superficialities and banalities of civilised life. “Primitivism”, Abrams points out, “is as old as humanity’s recorded thought and imaginings, and is reflected in the myths of a vanished age of gold and a lost Garden of Eden”. As urban life becomes more and more complex the attraction of the primitive increases. In literature, primitivism has long been used by
writers to offer a criticism of civilised society. This impulse lies behind the different versions of the pastoral, past and present. Modern man, living as he does in a world which is being increasingly industrialised and technologised, is plagued by a sense of estrangement and alienation from his deepest self and from nature. There is strong urge in him for the reintegration of his self and the recovery of the lost vitality and wholeness of being. The findings of psychology and anthropology, which have been surprising, have strengthened it. Among the twentieth century writes D.H. Lawrence (1885-1930) is said to have given distinctive expression to this urge in some of his novels such as The Woman Who Rode Away and The Plumed Serpent.

It is not necessary to labour the point that in The Strange Case Billy is aggressively critical of the civilised society which he rejects and prefers the primitive tribal society to it. But it is neither an outright rejection of all civilisation, nor a blind sentimental and romantic attachment to all that is primitive and a plea for it. What he rejects and revolts against is the upper-class Indian society only — the class of his birth and upbringing — which is depraved, rootless, spiritually sterile and anchorless, vulgarly imitative of pseudo-western ideas and values and tastes. His indignation is directed against its false, money-centred and dehumanising values. He makes his viewpoint clear to Romi. That Billy values and cherishes his friendship with Romi, who is a very fine product of the very civilised class he protests against, and takes the risk of coming out of his tribal anonymity to help his friend in a critical situation, implies that he recognises the good that even the upper-class is capable of doing. Moreover he is genuinely sensible of his father's incorruptible and uncompromising integrity in his private and public life. Billy is cautious enough not to make any blanket condemnation of all civilisation. He revolts against his society as it does
not help him to realise the true meaning and purpose of life and discover his essential identity. His moving away from it to join the primitive society reveals his urge to find order and stability he could not find in his own.

Billy's preoccupation with the primitive, as seen already, springs from two sources: the urkraft which Tuula, his Swedish friend, detects in him, and his own deep and impassioned study of anthropology which aims at studying the whole man rather than any one compartmentalised aspect of human nature. He does not at any time place instincts and emotions above reason and intellect. His dissatisfaction with his own upper-class society strengthens it further. The comparative simplicity of the life of the tribals, their few needs and anti-materialistic values of life, and the possibility of achieving order and stability in his own life by living among them must have been his considerations to decide to go primitive. Tuula, in many ways a kindred spirit, who also shares his interest in the Indian tribes, must have made her impact upon him in his choice of the primitive. Her clear and unambiguous sense of values and her view of the relationship between individuals and society, obviously influences him. It is to her, and not even to Romi, that he confides all his fears, dilemmas, hopes and exasperations. About her he tells Romi:

She had quite a simple philosophy, really, bordering on our Hindu beliefs. She believed that to survive man needs a minimum of goods which must be given to him by society or he must receive the exchange to procure them. This minimum, however, is very, very low, ---, and except in times of great calamity, like war or famine, easily available. Once the society or your profession ensures this minimum, you should devote all your energies to the
full exploitation of your gifts --- gifts you are born with, and in the process contribute as much to the society as you can.\textsuperscript{82}

For her money is just “a whole lot of paper”. To be honest to oneself and in one’s “search for truth”, one must be prepared “to go it alone”.\textsuperscript{83} This is almost like Nachiketas in the \textbf{Upanishads} speaking.

Billy values the tribal society – because he finds it to be a human society. Never does he think of it as an ideal society or the best of all possible societies. It should be noted that he does not at all try to wean Romi away to the primitive. Therefore in his love of the primitive there is no nostalgic longing for a “golden age” and no place in his thinking for the idea of the “noble savage”. He is so free from any kind of ambition that he does not have even the desire “for becoming a “good primitive””.\textsuperscript{84} Therefore in the novel there is no idyllic confrontation between the primitive and civilised worlds. As Prempati points out, “What comes through is not a primitive celebration of the primitive Satpura life. The novel, so to say, lives through a tension between the two ends of the given civilization, between the two distinct tribalisms spanning the complex divide of a strange society”.\textsuperscript{85} For Billy being primitive is only a first step. It is not an absolute dedication to the primitive ideal, his gaze being set on something beyond, which he hesitantly calls “God”. Going primitive is his solution for his personal crisis, not a generalized plea or propaganda for the primitive. It is rather strange that so sensitive a critic as Pathak should say, “As Billy’s example testifies, if one is able to establish a rapport with the primitive forces in the world of nature, one can get rid of all problems of life”.\textsuperscript{86} The polarisation of New Delhi and the Maikala Hills on the novel, representing two distinct cultures, reveals what has been lost by the upper crust of Indian society, in its ignorance of traditional and enduring values of life.
and pursuit of false refinement. The point to be stressed about Billy is that having become a primitive, he realises that it is not the end of his quest but only the midway resting place for a further spiritual quest and regeneration.

Once it is known that Billy is alive to the outside world, thanks to Romi’s wife’s understandable womanly sympathy for Meena, the search to start with and later on hunt for him begins. The entire state machinery is brought in for the purpose. Romi is forced to be a helpless spectator of the speedy developments which go beyond his authority and control. And Billy is shot dead by a havildar whose cousin he has killed while escaping. Only his ashes in an earthen pot return home. Perhaps Biswas Senior understands in his son’s death the tremendous urge that propelled Billy to the choice he made in his life. Meena, however, does not, because she cannot. To Romi, who is deeply moved by the heroic and tragic end of his friend, the meaning and significance of his life and his pursuits, is not lost.

By juxtaposing the two sharply opposed societies, the novel suggests forcefully what ought to be the relation between self and society. It dramatises, as it were, the integration and fulfillment that Billy achieves by uniting himself with the tribal society, which helps him to rise and grow to a higher stature. Billy’s experience in the tribe brings him a mature perception and understanding of the civilised society as well as the human relationship that ought to be between self and society. He becomes much more penetrating in his understanding of the issue than either Sindi or Ratan. He becomes even tolerant of the civilised society he had abandoned. He even becomes a sort of visionary, his concerns extending beyond the temporal world. But unfortunately he is not destined to live and continue his quest. It is idle to ask whether he would have returned to the society he came
away from, had he lived on. Even if he did, he would have been viewed as a rebel, a renegade.

The next chapter takes up for consideration Joshi’s fifth and final novel, The City and the River, from the point of view of the theme chosen. In form, content and technique, it is very different from all the preceding novels, and marks a distinct departure in Joshi’s practice. As the title itself suggests it is, unlike the other novels of Joshi, not a protagonistic novel. And the point of view chosen too is different. In its overall theme, it goes beyond the temporal society and world we are familiar with. Therefore the relation between self and society as handled in this novel is given a new dimension, as the next chapter intends to show.
Notes and References


3. Ibid., p. 9.

4. Ibid., p. 7.

5. Ibid., p. 8.

6. Ibid., p. 9.

7. Ibid., p. 11.

8. Ibid.


11. Ibid., p. 20-21.

12. Ibid., p. 23.

13. Ibid., p. 122.


15. Ibid., p. 124.

16. Ibid., p. 125.

17. Ibid., p. 97.

18. Ibid., p. 189.

19. Ibid., pp. 180-181

20. Ibid., p. 182.

21. Tapan Kumar Ghosh, p. 73.

23. Ibid., p. 98.
24. Ibid., p. 69.
25. Ibid., pp. 54-55.
27. Ibid., p. 96.
28. Ibid., pp. 96-97.
29. Ibid., p. 108.
30. Ibid., pp. 176-177.
31. Ibid., p. 60.
32. Ibid., p. 68.
33. Ibid., p. 70.
34. Ibid., p. 187.
35. Ibid., p. 189.
36. Ibid., p. 186.
37. Ibid., p. 187.
38. Ibid., pp. 188-89.
39. Ibid., p. 96.
40. Ibid., p. 97.
41. Ibid., pp. 43-44.
42. Ibid., p. 190.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid., p. 111.

53. Billy hugging the magazines and newspapers desperately as an assurance of his normalcy reminds one of a similar experience that Marlow, the internal dramatic narrator in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, goes through. As he journeys into the interior of the Congo to fetch Kurtz who is ill, he has an oppressive sense of unreality. He happens upon a manual of the Merchant Navy which strikes him an assuring reminder of the ordered world of civilisation to which he belongs. He clutches on to it to retain his sense of normalcy.


55. Ibid., p. 137.

56. Ibid., pp. 140-41.

57. Ibid., p. 141.

58. Ibid., p. 142.

59. Ibid.


61. Tapan Kumar Ghosh, p. 82.


63. Tapan Kumar Ghosh, p. 82.

65. The Strange Case, p. 143.

66. Ibid., p. 225.

67. Ibid., p. 147.

68. R.K. Dhawan, The Novels of Arun Joshi, p. 22.


70. Ibid., p. 148.

71. Ibid. The cited passage also shows how mistaken Dhawan is in his view that Billy likes the unrestrained life-style of the primitive people who go in for uninhibited drinking and dancing and open orgiastic love-making" [The Novels of Arun Joshi, p. 21].

72. The Strange Case, pp. 112, 146.

73. Verrier Elwin, the noted Gandhian and anthropologist, who lived with many tribes including those in Central India, and studied them, and whose works Arun Joshi was probably familiar with, writes about the nature of tribal friendships: "--- in tribal society I found an entirely new kind of relationship with people. In a Muria ghotul, for example, you were friends with everybody: you might have more to do with the Sardar or Kotwar, but that was a matter of convenience; friendliness was universal. --- this is the unique and rather wonderful thing about tribal life: You escape from the normal individualism, the possessiveness and jealousies of sophisticated friendships into something broader and more universal". - The Tribal World of Verrier Elwin [London: Oxford University Press, 1964], pp. 125-26.

74. The Strange Case, pp. 156-58. Tapan Ghosh in his book (p. 84) seems to think mistakenly that Bilasia is an incarnation of Devi Mata. Dhunia clearly says of her that she is "only a wife of this perishable world".

75. Ibid., pp. 173-74.

76. Ibid., p. 191.

77. Ibid., pp. 159-60. Dhunia's words are poetic. Verrier Elwin testifies in his book that poetic speech comes very naturally to the tribals he has seen. Of the people in Maikal Hills he says that they were "poets by temperament". He writes: "I found the people talking poetry. An old women speaks of fire as a flower blossoming on a dry tree, of an umbrella as a peacock with one leg ---" [The Tribal World of Verrier Elwin, p. 143].

78. Ibid., p. 183.

79. Ibid., p. 189.
80. Tapan Kumar Ghosh, p. 85.


82. The Strange Case, p. 176.

83. Ibid., pp. 177.

84. Ibid., p. 148.
