

Letters to Sushila



Gijubhai Badheka



Translated by
Mamata Pandya

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*Translated from the Gujarati
'Sushila ne Patro'*

by

Mamata Pandya



Design & Illustration

Aditya Pandya

Sushila ne Patro (Part 1)

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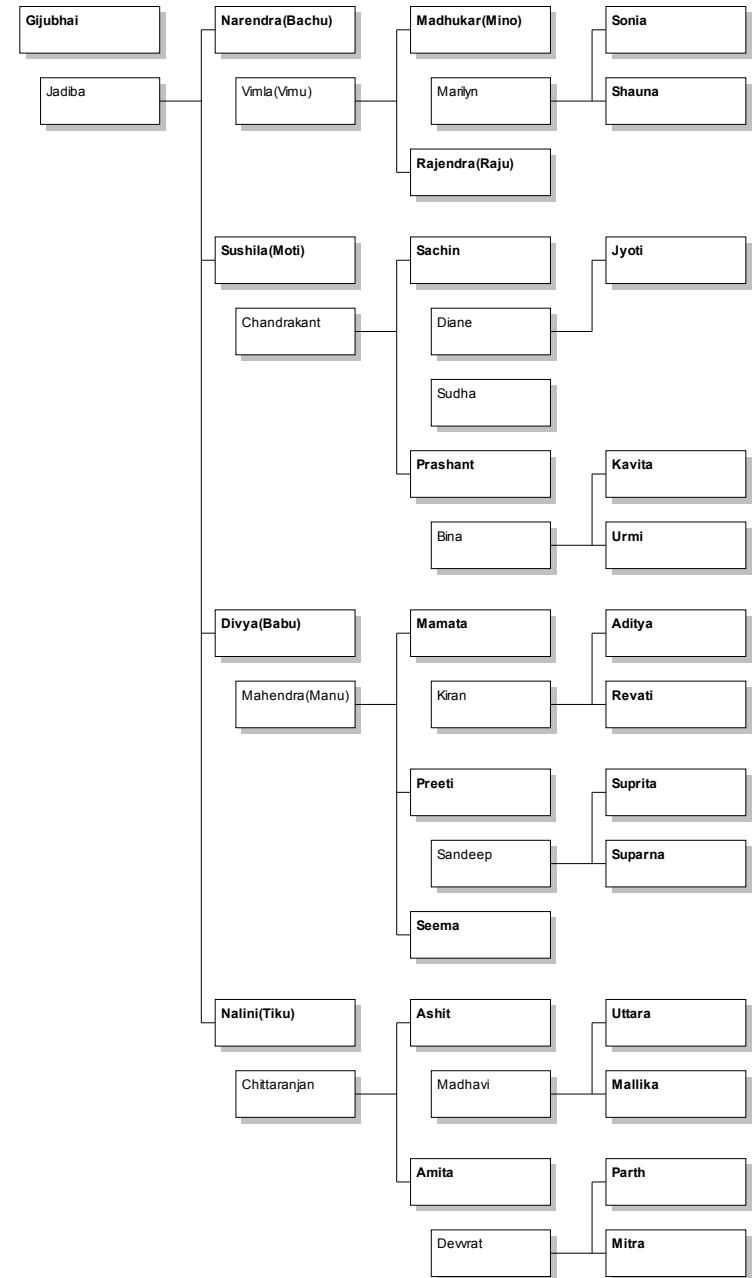
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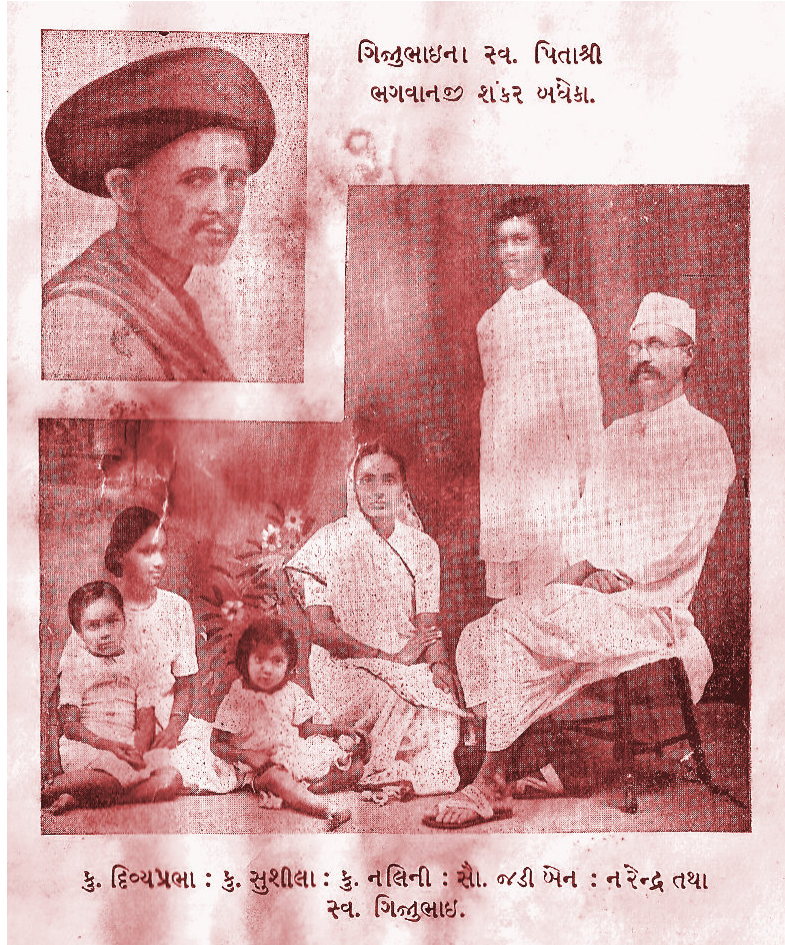
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Foreword

I never really knew my grandfather Gijubhai. He passed away when my mother Divya was just 18 years old. As we grandchildren grew, we came to know Gijubhai mainly through the balvartas – his stories for children – that we heard from our mami Vimuben and our older cousins. While we knew him as our Nana, our mother's father, we never learnt about what he was like as a person. Surprisingly my sisters and I do not recall our mother talking about him as a father, or about her childhood days. Looking back now, we wonder why that was so. Is it because we never asked her? And yet, year after year we spent our vacations in Bhavnagar, with many days and hours in the same house that Gijubhai and his family had lived in. His photograph on the small cupboard with the glass front was a continuous presence as we swung on the hindola, and our mother and her sisters chatted with their Bhabhi – our mami.

Over the years my interest in Gijubhai as an educator and storyteller has been growing. I have been reading and translating his writing, and through that, expanding my understanding of the multi-faceted person that he was. But the one facet that remained unexplored was that of him as a parent. While he has written a great deal on parenting, no doubt a lot of it based on his own experiences and observations, this still did not directly reveal what he was like as a father.



Left to right: Divyaprabha; Sushila; Nalini; Jadiben; Narendra; Gijubhai

Above: Bhagvanji Shankar Badheka (Gijubhai's father)

Quite by chance, last year I chanced upon a small booklet titled *Sushila ne Patro* (Letters to Sushila). I discovered that these were some of the letters that Gijubhai had written to his oldest daughter Sushila while she was studying at Shantiniketan in 1936. For the first time I saw Gijubhai as a father, writing about news from home and the family. I got a peep into the distinct personalities and pastimes of the siblings – Bachubhai (Narendra, then aged 23 years), Motiben (Sushila, then aged 18), Tiku (Nalini, then aged 12) and Babu (Divya, then aged 15 years) as they were growing up.

The letters cover only a few months during the period when Sushila was away from home. But they bring to life the small details of daily life – family activities, food, plants, weather, neighbourhood happenings, people, and the house and its surroundings.

Even today, over eighty years after the letters were written, there is a comforting sense of familiarity as one reads about the house. From the mid-1960s till the late 1980s when we grandchildren spent time in that house, many features described in the letters remained the same – the hindolas in the middle room and outside; the osri with the trellis; the toilet structures at the back; and of course, the Balmandir on the hill. It is so easy for us to visualise just what is described. I have retained several Gujarati words in the translation, especially because each of these evokes very specific memories and associations for us Bhavnagaris.

Equally vivid are the memories of the different generations of sisters described in the letters. My grandmother Jadiba and her two sisters Mukta mashi and Savita mashi (both featuring in the letters) sitting together on the outside hindola in the evening and catching up on the gossip with their Bhabhi Mota mami. Then, the next generation – Motiben, Babu and Tiku in the middle room with the hindola, chatting for hours with their Bhabhi Vimuben. And then again, us three sisters – Mamata, Preeti and Seema, and our high jinks on the hindola with our cousins Raju, Ashit, Amita and Nandini.

The letters evoked so many reminiscences, sparked new insights and questions, and opened up so many gaps to be filled. Sadly, none of Gijubhai's children are with us anymore, and so the mysteries remain. But for our generation who has strong memories of the house and the aunts; for our children's generation who have, in fact, spent some childhood days in Bhavnagar, and for the next generation who will perhaps hear about these, here are a few pages from the family album and shared legacy.

Mamata
September 2020

Memories from a Generation After

Something about childhood memories is that they seem to stay unchanged, resisting revisions or painting over. This must be why some images, smells and moments outlive the decades even as newer memories tangle themselves up. And some of these settle into an ageless precipitate of near-legend – the ones, perhaps, that had something old about them even when they were made.

Growing up we spent part of every summer vacation in Bhavnagar visiting both sets of my grandparents, whose houses were within a short walk of each other. But almost every Bhavnagar evening was reserved for a third house that lay between the other two. Another family house, but home only to my great aunt Vimu mami and her mysterious son who was there erratically but was great fun when he was around. Yet it was more than a house in every way. At Balmandir we were unconsciously piecing together a jigsaw puzzle of our family's history and, at the same time, becoming new pieces of the puzzle ourselves.

If there was ever a place that lived up to its name, this little hillock, Balmandir, was it: in spirit and in flesh a sacred place for children. Vimu mami lived in the old house at the foot of the rise – the very house described in these letters, where my Nani – Babu – had grown up. Vimu mami had given her life to the schoolhouse at the top of the hill, and her overflowing heart to all the children who had pattered across the



The Badheka family home in 2017, largely unchanged since the 1930s

sand here. Her presence, the house and the schoolhouse, and the delicious grounds in between them, together made up a world where children were royalty – a world whose seeds were planted a generation before her, by Gijubhai and others.

No wonder then that for my sister Revati and I, and for our cousins reuniting from various cities, this little universe felt especially ours. Just like it must have to my mother and her sisters and cousins, and *her* mother and *her* brothers and sisters and cousins before that.

You'd turn in from the narrow sandy lane, then beneath an arch of creepers you'd unlatch a tiny fairy-tale gate into a kankra yard, a carpet of pebbles with bald patches, ensconced within thick green shrubs and trees. It would be newly sprinkled with water that had settled the summer dust, laden the shrubs with a happy dripping burden, and lifted a petrichor out of the mud below. If you didn't find Mami waiting for you on the garden swing, you'd climb the three steps up to the cool latticed foyer and call out for her. This oshri was rarely locked; besides, the mesh front walls and the old doors inset with barred openings meant that even bolted, they never quite shut you out. A large framed photograph of Gandhiji leading one of his marches met you here in the antechamber, reminded you already that you were in a house of history.

Mami's voice would wander out from within to welcome you in, warm and riding on eternal laughter even before you saw the mischievous crinkles around

her eyes. She'd be putting together a platter of snacks together in the kitchen on the far side of the inner courtyard. You were always fed – fruits, chevadas, nuts – and complimented on one thing or another. You'd settle into the hindola at the centre of the drawing room and, swinging slowly, you'd take in the deep wood and clear glass of the cabinets, book cases and framed pictures dancing around you. Invariably, unconsciously you'd be fondling the ornate brass chain of the swing. Little would have changed since the last summer, and you'd let yourself be reminded and comforted among the knick-knacks, the swans and peacocks and vases, and the large painting of the woman with the deer from faraway Bengal.

In a smiling gaze an erect man in round glasses and a commanding yet playful moustache oversaw the proceedings from his large portrait photograph over the door. We had gathered that this Gijubhai was famous and important. Yet for us Mami was the living centre of this place, and we'd have to struggle to remember the web of relationships – she was the widow of Gijubhai's son Narendra, who like his father, had died young. From another frame high in the room, Bachubhai, as he was familiarly known, emanated a soft light, looking noble and utterly benign. This was my great uncle, Nani's brother. It was a regular exercise to grope our way around everyone's ubiquitous nicknames, which added an extra layer of complexity to the puzzle. We had never met these men, of course: the black and white photographs were themselves old. It would stretch my young imagination

to link as siblings my wrinkled old Nani and this faraway youthful Bachu, who could have been a filmstar or an evangelist in the photograph we saw once a year. News of family near and far would be shared as we rocked back and forth on the hindola – the distinctly grown-up word for what was always for us a hinchka, a swing, like the ones out in the Balmandir playground.

If the cool clean dimness of the Badheka house and Mami's warmth were one half of our Balmandir, the other half was the playground. These summer visits to Balmandir were essentially my education in swings, slides, merry-go-rounds, see-saws, jungle-gyms, and other things we had no names for.

The whole hilly landscape around the house in the Balmandir compound seems to have been designed with children in mind. If there were steps going up and down, there was usually a smooth stone or cement slide alongside. Where there wasn't, you'd challenge yourself on the friction of the mud or the rough concrete next to the stairway to run up and down. Never the stairs – there were enough of those to plod up and down everywhere else in the world.

The main schoolhouse was at the crest of the hillock, along whose slope was a colourful variety of installations for going up and down. Apart from a couple of slides, there were concrete pipes, brightly painted in red and yellow stripes, which made for echoey tunnels you hid in or slid through, and varnished, glossy old tires arranged by size and

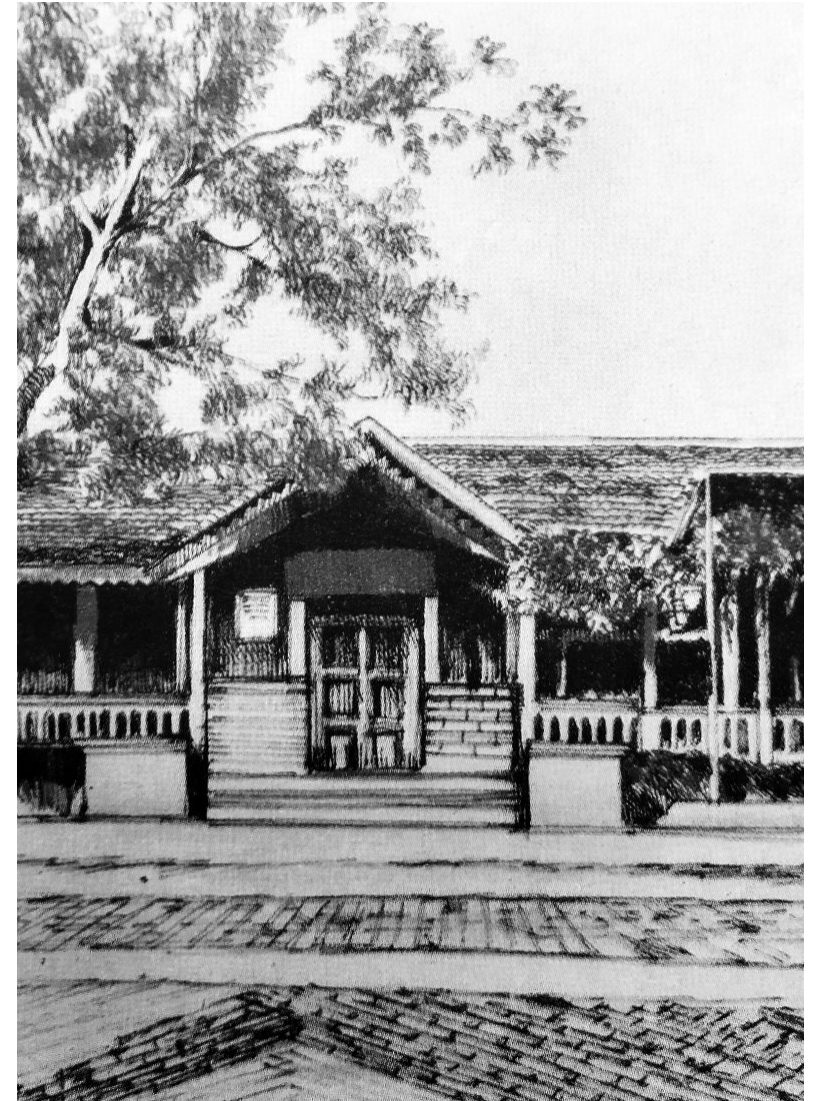
embedded in the ground to make a sort of obstacle course, with hedges of plants here and there. Along the shallower face of the rise a ramp meandered up to the top, in the shade of a bower of pink and white bougainvillea all the way.

At the top stood the school-house in two levels under a pitched roof, with verandahs running all around the upstairs and downstairs behind their slatted wooden parapets. A catwalk made in metal grille led off to the side, on which you'd clank and bounce, levitating over the ground, and end up on a platform among the dreadlocks of a Banyan tree. You'd descend back to the ground on a grey metal slide after you've taken in the view from the hill over the wall. Here the height, the metal, and the grey paint made you feel like you were growing up.

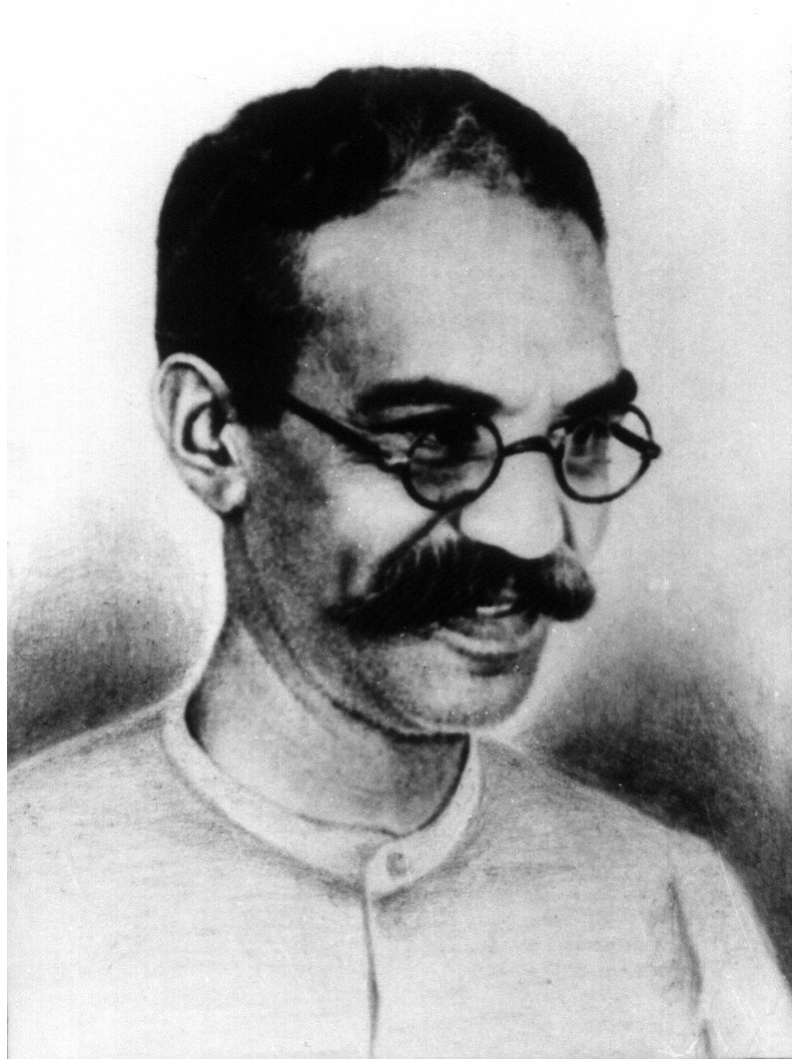
Revati and I, as well as our cousins, only ever experienced Balmandir in its sleeping vacation-state because, of course, we were visiting in the summer holidays. We'd peer into empty classrooms and our voices would echo in empty hallways and verandahs. We'd try to spread ourselves, the four or five of us, over the playground meant for probably a hundred students or more. It felt more or less ours, yet there were regularly moments when I had to stop and imagine the children and grown-ups who inhabited the place most of the year, day in and day out, to whom obviously it belonged in a whole different way. Or perhaps not so different, who knows?

We – at least a couple of generations of this family – are used to conjuring up unknown worlds to populate this particular place that we do know. The space itself has gone on and on, little changed across seasons and generations, anchoring the stories we pass on, and connecting people that have never met each other. The place and people we know make these letters from Gijubhai to his daughter real for us, and the letters in turn are full of the immediacy that make the place and people from nearly a hundred years ago come alive in every paragraph. They offer me glimpses of my Nani as a teenager, of the adventures she got up to with her sisters and Bachu, of the house before Vimu mami had been part of it, which even then had the hindola in the middle, and the same chowk, and a garden that was getting the same attention, and was bustling with young people making stories and memories.

Aditya
November 2020



The Balmandir schoolhouse at the top of the hill



Preface

This is a collection of the letters that I wrote to my daughter Sushila when she went to Shantiniketan to study Art and Dance. While Sushila was away from home, these letters were an attempt to make her feel as if she was at home. They are for all the daughters who are away from home to study. I dedicate the letters to all the children of Gujarat.

Gijubhai

Letter 1

Balmandir, Bhavnagar

Date: 24-2-1936

Dear Sushila,

It is 10.30 at night. Ba [Jadiba], Babu, Tiku and Bachubhai are playing cards. These days this is what they do after dinner. In the beginning when they played they used to make a lot of noise and shout and get angry at each other. If Tiku got angry, Babu and Bachu would tease her. No one was clear whose fault it was. I told them, "This is no way to play a game. Better you don't play at all if you play like this." They understood. Now they play without bickering and they laugh and enjoy the game.

Tonight they enjoyed ringan-vadi shaak with rice for dinner. These days vadis bought from the market are popular. They are added to ringan and potatoes, and to other dishes. The vadis are red and spicy hot. You know how it is in our home – once a trend starts it goes on.



Everyone here misses you. Bachu thought of you just now when he was eating a banana. He said, "When Motiben comes we'll ask her to draw a bunch of bananas. She'll get good practice for

drawing the banana plant.” A couple of days back we brought in a bunch of bananas from our vaadi, and we have hung it inside, on the ring of the hindola in the big room. As the bananas near the top ripen, we are eating them. The half-green and half-yellow bunch would make a nice picture. The bananas are also really sweet. Babu and Tiku say that this time you will get your fill of bananas. There are some big bunches in the Karias’ garden. They will be almost ripe when you come.

When Babu, Tiku and Bachu are free they are up to all kinds of activities. Tiku has put a matli in her room. She fills it with water herself. She gives the lid and the glass to Dhanbai to wash. You remember her room with the picture of Ram-Krishna. Tiku has added some more pictures of Shri Krishna. Tiku seems to be a true Vaishnav.

Nowadays the newspapers are arranged on the paat in the big room. Babu is in charge of organising these. It is felt that Bachu makes a bit of a mess. Babu herself does not mind things being disorganised, so she has been made the organiser. Tiku and I are good organisers; you too are counted among the good organisers.

There are eight dogs in our compound these days. The puppies have grown. One of the dogs had dug a big burrow; I got Bora to fill it up. One of the dogs killed a saheb’s chicken and brought it here. Another one took away Monghiben’s chappal. Today all the dogs got together and were chasing a calf; I sent Bora

to bring it back. But the dogs are not all mischief. A few days ago somebody was trying to steal the bunch of bananas and the dogs alerted us by barking loudly. But by the time we came out, the thief had fled. They continue to bark at Bawaji, the temple priest, especially when he blows on the conch during the aarti.

The gramophone has come out again from its rest, and everyone has been playing the Devdas record. These days there is much talk of the music of Dhooop Chhaon [a 1935 Hindi film]. Harbhai has ordered the record, and Babu-Tiku want to borrow it. The records of Trirangi and Premnagar seem to be hiding. Records are like seasons – whatever is in season gets played again and again. Abdul Karim and Omkarnath are occasionally played. Babu is very fond of them. She likes to have records play while she chops vegetables or does other housework. You know that she has elected Music [as a subject].

Do use your imagination and send a picture.

That’s all for today. All are well.

Blessings
From your Gijubhai

Letter 2

Balmandir, Bhavnagar

Date 5-3-36

Dear Sushila,

Got your letter. Read about the French lady who has come there and is staying with all of you, and about her manners. More about that in another letter. For now, giving you some other news.

Bachu, Babu and Tiku are not playing cards these days. Bachu prefers to read, so games are off.

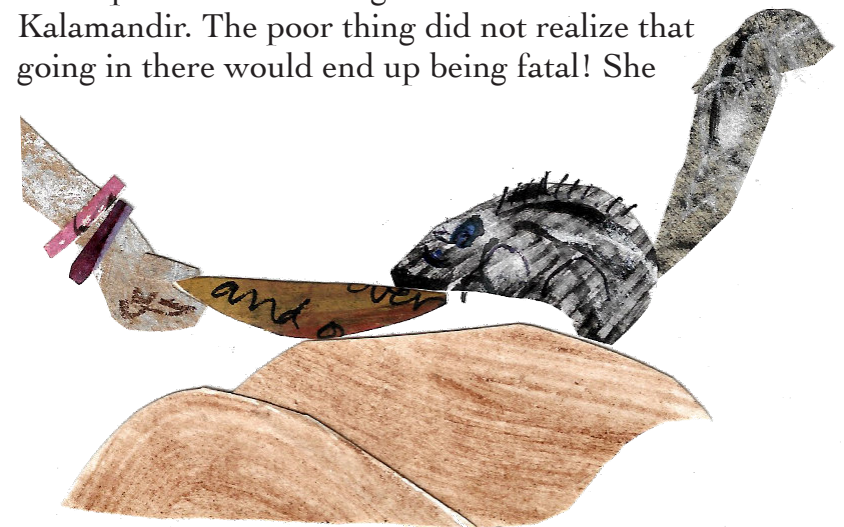
This week there is good news from the kitchen. We are eating a variety of shaak – made of raw banana and ringan-potatoes; potatoes and drumstick; potatoes and vadi. The vadis are spicy but everyone eats them even while they express their love for boiled vegetables. Isn't your mouth watering as you read this? We also tried two southern dishes – pithlu and banana stem dish. Taraben has taught us about different dishes. Then we have the vaalol and vaal that grow behind the house; kachumber of tomatoes and onions; garlic chutney; papad, and buttermilk. Bachu and Babu are quick to point out any shortcomings in the menu. Tiku is devoted to potatoes. Babu, well, you know, today she likes one thing and tomorrow something else.

Last week Babu-Tiku had to be taken to Daji kaka the doctor. They both had sore throats. How did he

know that it was because of eating too much red chillies and vadis? Daji kaka said, "Sing a song, and I will write your medicines." They tried hard not to have to, but ultimately Babu had to sing. Daji kaka praised her singing. Tiku sang as many times as he asked her to. Finally we got the medicines and came home.

Tiku's club continues. For a while I had to stop her from going on account of her health. For Tiku staying at home is like jail punishment, but there is no option. Once the club members all brought food from their homes and they ate on the Balmandir terrace. I have made a rule for the club members: that the club is for playing, eating and having fun, not for fighting with each other. A club can mould social behaviour; the club can have a lot of influence over its members. There also needs to be someone to keep an eye on the club.

A squirrel died of hunger and thirst in Kalamandir. The poor thing did not realize that going in there would end up being fatal! She



must have been trapped inside when someone shut the door. How she must have suffered. When the door was opened she was on her last breath. Bachu-Tiku ran to give her some water; she had a bit, but then gave up. Bachu, Tiku and Nanji buried it near our well with a lot of salt. They were very disturbed about the little creature. A dove also died in our faliya. Tiku-Bachu had just seen it playing and the next minute it fell unconscious. It did not seem as if it had been killed by anyone. We left it near Bavaajini Tekri; the ants must have made a meal of it.

These days those who work in the Balmandir have been assigned the task of planting and raising trees. Each tree has a chit on it with the name of its caretaker. Each one waters his or her tree every evening. We do not have trees like the ones in Shantiniketan. That is something we miss here. It will be good if these trees grow, our hill will look beautiful. The Durbar has planted trees on both sides of the road near Bavaajini Tekri, with cages to protect them. The road will be beautiful when they have grown. Rows of asopalav and borsalli have been planted opposite our Kalamandir. Do you remember we had seen such plantations in Panchgini?

I must give news of Tiku's room. She is a real Vaishnav. Along with four or five pictures of Shri Krishna, there is one of Ramkrishna Paramhans. There is also Chaitanya and Buddh. Two small Krishnas have been recently added. Also added is a

picture of Sahajanand Swami. Tiku and I take turns to light the dhoop and keep the room fragrant.



There has been a good crop of methi in our backyard. Bora crushed the dried pods and took out the seeds. We got this crop after a lot of watering and hard work.

Here is some amusing news. Dahiben, Shashiben and Rupaliben live together in Dahiben's house. One morning a centipede appeared and one of them killed it with a knife; but its tail kept on moving for a while. The ladies trembled with fear and prayed to God to forgive them. Do you think God will forgive them?

Today we have brought some kesuda flowers – your Nandababu's favourite – to the Balmandir. You know there is a khakhra tree in Danga. We have arranged the branches with the flowers in a brass pot and made a lovely arrangement. I am sending you a flower with this letter.

We see a bird like a Kite these days. It does not seem to be a local bird. The crows are harassing it a lot. It has a heavy body, is black with brown and white stripes and dots. Bachubhai is studying it.

No other news.

Blessings
From your Gijubhai

Letter 3

Balmandir,
Bhavnagar
Date 12-3-36

Dear Sushila,

You must have received my letter of last Wednesday. Why have you not replied to it? I read that you have established the principles of universal brotherhood and state of equilibrium in your room. The future of the world lies on that path.

You know that these days we are fighting a battle with the mice at home. We have emptied all the shelves in the storeroom and painted them with tar. We are hoping that the smell of the tar will chase the mice away. Last week Bachu burnt dry neem leaves to make a dhoop in the whole house, and especially in the storeroom. We do not know how the mice were affected by this. But three-four days ago we did see a fat rat in the mouth of a cat. These days a cat has taken a liking to our house, she seems to think that she will be happy here. No one has objected to the cat's presence because she does not eat the grains at night, nor the flour and the marcha, and she does not knock over the bottle of gyaastel.

The Darjido is in full form these days. It calls continuously, "Tee-Tee!" from the cluster of trees on



the southern side, while its tail keeps time with its call. It is vasant and the birds are joyful. The Small Blue Jay has made a nest in the hollow near the akhada and will soon lay its eggs there. This bird enjoys catching flying butterflies. The Greater Blue Jay also seems to reside around here. Once the sun is out the Kalo koshi comes to sit on the posts and swoops to catch and swallow insects flying in the air, or on the ground. The Tuk Tuk has started scooping out a nest in the wooden post. A dove has laid eggs in the hedge opposite Kalamandir. Do you remember once when a dove had laid eggs in our mehendi hedge and the garden lizard ate them up? This is the season when the birds lay eggs and the garden lizards, snakes, crows and drongos will be looking to eat them. If some of the eggs were not eaten, the sky would be crowded with birds. Nature has its own ways to keep things in balance.

The Lapwing's call of kartivrat kartivrat was heard for a few days but not any longer. It is nice to listen to the Lapwing on moonlit nights, it has two or three different kinds of calls. The Sonido is not heard yet, perhaps we won't not hear it now. It is a bird of the boundaries of fields, and now that there are so many houses around here, it may have abandoned us.

Recently a goat has taken to entering the garden and eating the leaves. We are looking for its goatherd but cannot catch him. There is no point in punishing the poor goat when its owner needs a lesson. Now that the grass is drying up, the problem of stray animals

will increase. Hungry cows will eat anything – paper, rags, dry leaves. The owners are callous. They tend it well only as long as the animal gives milk. What can the poor animals do? They wander here and there trying to survive. There is no point in our beating such animals.

The chameli is blooming near the jaali. The verandah is fragrant at night. The plants have been trimmed recently, including the jasmine. The mogra is putting out buds. The first two flowers blossomed the day before yesterday. So fragrant! Smelt it again after twelve months. Soon every branch and twig will be laden with mogra flowers. The tagar is also starting to bud. Nowadays Bachubhai is taking an interest in watering the plants. They all look happy when they are washed and watered.

Bora has cut some branches of the peepar behind the house. All the raw bor from the bordi are gone; there are hardly any ripe ones. This time there was no bor-eating activity planned.

You will be glad to know that the lotas for carrying water out to the toilet have been replaced with cans. They are easier to carry. The lota that was used for this has been scrubbed and put back on the shelf with the others.

The neem tree is shedding too many leaves and twigs. Did you know that the thin twigs are used to stitch the leaf plates? That dove has put a lot of these twigs in her nest. Nothing is wasted in nature.

Special news for you: the tea room has been moved to the room near the bathroom. Right now we all fit in there. When you come you will either have to sit outside or we will have to change the room.

Other news is that we do a dhoop of lobaan in the house every day. Bachu is in charge of this.

Bachu is a bit low these days but he should be alright in a couple of days.

Prabhulal from Kutch came and went. Anasuyaben came once for tea. Omabhai remembered you.

Tiku, Babu, your Ba are well; Mama is fine.

Blessings
From your Gijubhai



Letter 4

Balmandir, Bhavnagar

Date 19-3-36

Dear Sushila,

I write to you every Wednesday. This time I am one day late, so my letter will reach you a day late.

From your letters I can tell that you like my Wednesday letters. I will try as far as possible to keep these regular.

First, news about home. Your Ba's health is not too good, she will go to the doctor today. Do not worry. Babu's tonsils are bothering her. Bachubhai and I are alright.

In news from the kitchen: drumstick-vadi, drumstick and potatoes, potatoes and vadi, choli and vadi – these shaak are ruling. These days we don't remember which the king of vegetables is. You will have to remind us when you come.

A cat has cultivated our kitchen these days. The mice, which did not go with the tar and the neem smoke, are finding their way into the cat's



mouth. Perhaps because the cat is fat, she seems to catch fat rats. Two smaller mice were caught in the mousetrap.

The bathroom now has a fragrant soap.

The beans from the vaal are drying in our chowk. About half a seer of vaal. They are from Bora's part of the country and are very tasty. We will save some for you. The chowk is also being used to sun the mattresses and the rajais, and the washed clothes too, as usual.

These days Pushpaben and Tikuben gather the roses and mogra from the garden and arrange them in thalis and saucers filled with water. They arrange the roses and tagar in the stone thali, and the mogra in the glass saucers.

This time the sparrows have not come to nest in the house; they do not even come to sleep in the rings of the hindola. There are fewer small insects so we do not see the gecko on the wall as much.

The old newspapers on the newspaper table are replaced when the new ones come; if there is a delay in the new ones, the table remains empty.

The window near the table serves as the convenient place to keep bangles, pins, the soodi, and odds and ends. Mashi, Bachubhai and Babu play the gramophone near the table in the evening.

The osri is used as the office for the Budhwariyu [Wednesday Weekly]. The table is overflowing with papers and books.

Four pairs of mojdis, four pairs of chappals and one pair of slippers fit comfortably in the gallery.

A squirrel is determined to make a nest in the roof of the osri. It runs around frantically all afternoon. Sometimes it makes a sound like a whistle; squirrels can be quite loud.

The jasmine near the steps is in full bloom and smells nice at night. We sprinkle water in the front yard every evening; it makes it cool. For some days we had put up a swing instead of the hindola; now the hindola is back. We have put up the swing on the branches of the peepar and neem trees behind the bathroom. Babu and Tiku like to sit on that, in the cool shade.

All are waiting for the mulberries to fruit on the mulberry bush, the ringan to start appearing, the alvi leaves to grow, and the bananas to ripen on the plants to the south of the front yard.

To the north, near the khodibara, the gulmohar is shedding its leaves: soon it will be bare.

The raat rani is laden with buds. Next week will be filled with fragrance. After we trimmed the bushes, the roses are dark pink with a strong fragrance. After we separated and planted the rajnigandha bulbs in

different beds, the blooms have increased.

We have stopped people from throwing leftovers right behind the house, and made a new place for Santokbai to throw the waste. There is a gokarni vine growing behind the house, but no one seems to notice it. The sitafal tree near the window is shedding leaves but the new ones are getting ready to come. The last leaf dropped from the sitafal tree in the chowk; now the new ones have started to show.

The nearby toilet behind the house is Tiku's favourite. Fresh neem sprouts are seen near our toilet. The kerda will soon have beautiful flowers, and then the kerda fruit. One branch of the khijda tree near the toilet has broken. The unidentified tree near the toilet is also shedding leaves. The pebbles on the path to the toilet are being displaced by the footsteps and it is getting cleaner. The toilet is very clean these days – Ratno cleans the toilet; Babu washes the kitchen and Bora washes the chowk.

To the west, the Darbari water tank shines in the evening sun. It looks like a steamship, and is the colour of the Nubis of Africa.

To the south, Vinodpriya's sadhu and his beard are the same. We do not hear him blowing the conch these days; and because the conch is silent, so are the dogs.

To the east the greenery of our banana plants draws attention. The birds come and eat the tuber from the tuber plants in the morning. A few dry bor still hang

on the bordi.

To the north, Tiku's club members play on the exercise equipment and enjoy themselves.

As it is the dark part of the month, the night sky is bright with the spread of the stars and looks beautiful and grand.

Blessings
From your Gijubhai

Letter 5

Balmandir, Bhavnagar

Date 25-3-36

Dear Sushila,

Just received your letter. Now you try and leave as soon as you can so that you can spend some time with everyone here.

It has started to get warm here. The mornings and evenings are pleasant. The sun is strong in the afternoon.

The start of the summer heat is heralded by the "ghoo...ghoo...ghoo..." call of the doves.

The baby chick seems to have flown away; the one egg in the nest does not seem as if it will hatch. It is surprising that as yet the garden lizard or the mongoose have not eaten it up. The garden lizard can definitely reach there.

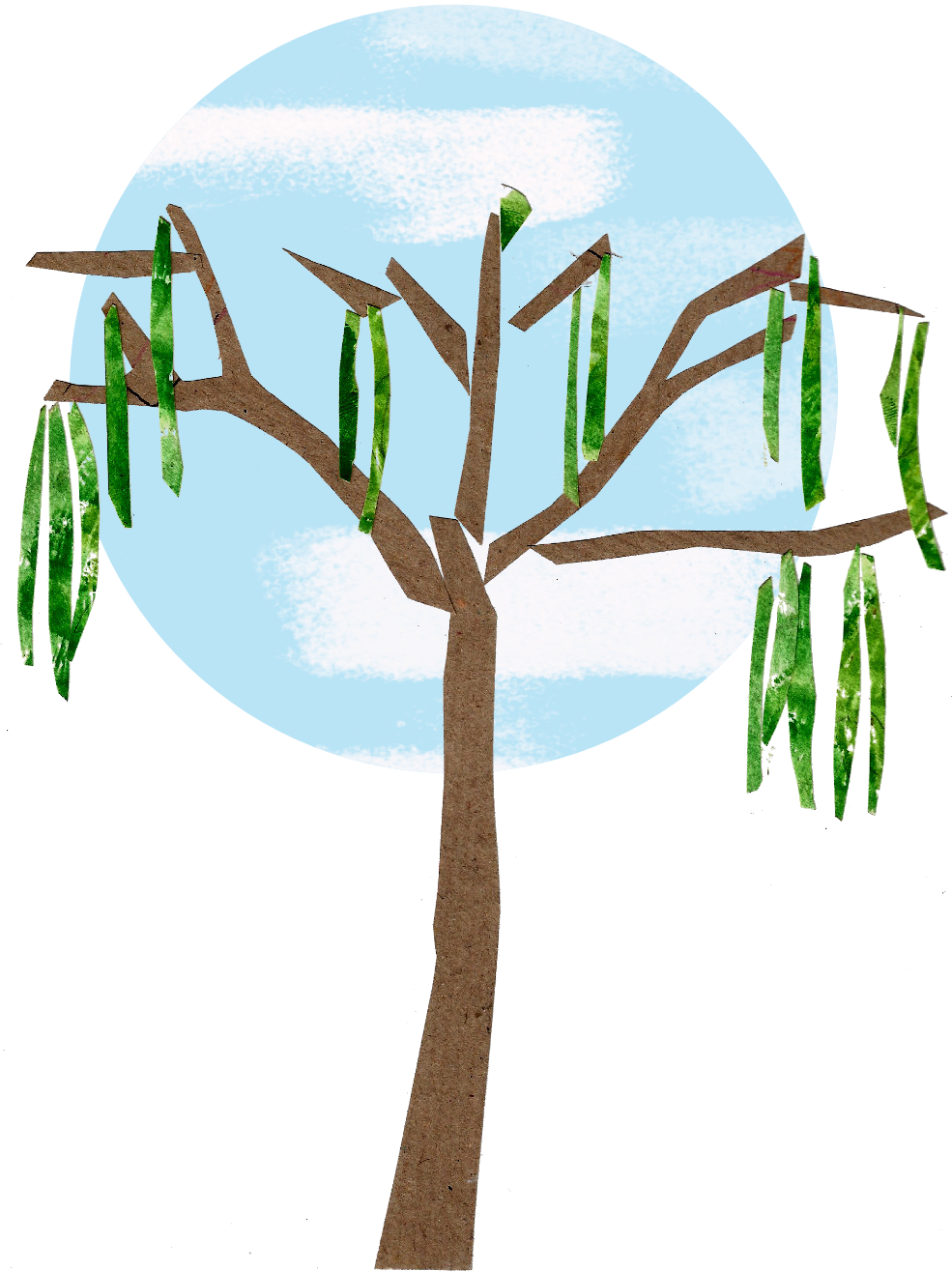
Two days ago the morning-timings have started in Vinay Mandir [the High School]. Tiku-Babu get up early and sleep early. Their early morning preparations look like they are getting ready for a big tiger hunt. After two hours of preparation, they go and study for two or three hours. Talk about digging a mountain to kill a mouse! The morning timings have just begun so their enthusiasm is high. They may tire as time passes.

The night card games have been suspended because of the morning classes. Now lunch time has moved from 10.30 in the morning to 11.15, so everyone's routine has changed. So many changes because of one change in school timings? This is an indication of the importance of school and studies in our life.

We have the self-learning system in our Vinay Mandir. As you know the homework is to be done there itself. So what great preparation is required in the morning? Combing one's hair, deciding which bangles to wear and finding a matching outfit, and finding a pair of earrings – all this is the preparation for going to Vinay Mandir. In one way our Vinay Mandir is good. Going there is not like "Oh, we have to go to school," but going to school "because we want to." I like that. This happens only when school does not feel like a burden.

Other news. The raat rani is in full bloom. It seems like there are a hundred flowers for every leaf. There are thousands of flowers, and that is not an exaggeration. It is so fragrant at night! You have seen the raat rani have you not?

We had taken down one bunch of bananas from which we have sent four each to Madhavjibhai, Gopalbhai and others. This is the bunch from the khasadia plant, which means shoe-like. The bananas have a thick skin, but it is not leathery, so I wonder why the poor bananas have been so named by people!



We have removed the vines of the vaal beans from behind the house. In its place we will plant a lot of alvi. By the time you come the digging of the soil should be complete. Last week Nanji was sacked so Bora has to do all the work. He is a good worker.

There are mulberries in the Kala Mandir chowk. Imagine mulberries in our stony Bhavnagar! Jagannath Gour brought a cutting from Gujarat, the sapling is one hand tall and it has fruit – we even ate a couple. People have started strolling on that side in the hope of eating mulberries.

These days the big tank for the students of Adhyapan Mandir [pre-primary teacher training building] remains full. On Monday Bachu and Tiku took the wind-up boat there. They really enjoy this kind of thing. Just because Bachu is grown up and has studied, why should he not go to get the boat to swim?

The dark part of the month is past. The star-studded sky looked so bright and beautiful. It seemed like the sky was showering the ambrosia of light.

The blossoms of the white tagar and jasmine look like stars scattered in the dark sky. I love to look at white flowers in the dark.

The peepar tree near our weaving school has shed all its leaves and is now full of the seed pods. It is as if the leaves have made room for the fruit. Some may not think that this is a pretty sight, but I do like even this

look.

The drumstick tree near the Avadich Boarding [the school's boarding house] is also bare of leaves but laden with the pods. I find that beautiful also. The fruits are the proof of a plant's productive life. We should be able to see the beauty in this stage.

The Balmandir oomro tree had become a dry stump, but it has started sprouting now. The newly emerging twigs look like the small toothy smiles of the children. It's spring.

Damu kaka is here and is regaling us with stories of his recent trip to Kutch. You know how interesting his tales are. You remember how much fun we had with him in Panchgini. I cannot tell the stories as well as he can. Damu kaka tells us, "In Kutch we travelled like rich people. We did not step out of the car. We even had tea while sitting in the car, did our shopping and even got a shave in the car!" As he was not familiar with the currency of Kutch he would just pick up what he wanted to buy and ask the shopkeeper to take the money for it! It appears that Kutch felt like a foreign country to Damu kaka! If he was so confused travelling in Kutch, imagine if he were really to travel abroad! He told us many tall tales.

I am leaving this evening for Rajkot where I am to inaugurate Marthak's Balmandir. I will return on Friday and the same morning will take the Balmandir children to Talaja and Gopnath. We will be back on Tuesday evening.

We are all well.

Blessings
From your Gijubhai

Letter 6

Balmandir, Bhavnagar
Date 29-7-36

Dear Sushila,

It has been over a week since you left from here. In the meanwhile we received two telegrams from Damu kaka. One saying that you reached Mumbai, and the other that you had left from Mumbai. We had told you to get them to send a telegram when you reached but you forgot. We had to send a telegram to get your news.

You must have reached Shantiniketan now. We are awaiting your letter from there. Soon you will be settled back in your studies.

Who are your new companions? From which parts of the country are they? Has that Sindhi lady come? Has the French house mistress arrived? Looking forward to your letter with all the news.

Here the news rises and sets with the days. The big news is about the trip to Sandhida Mahadev. Mashi and Mahashankarbhai were eager to have a 'party' and feed everyone with ladoos from the temple. They enthusiastically made arrangements. Mastrambhai's group and Upenbhai's group went by motor car. Mashi, your Ba, Babu and Tiku went with Mastrambhai. Mama, Bachubhai, another bhai, the cook and I, along with the flour, dal, vegetables and

fuel went in an open truck. This was the first experience of being in a truck. Mama, Bachubhai and I stood in the truck. After we passed Bhavnagar-Gadhechi the road ran through green fields. The wind got into our eyes and slapped our forehead. As the truck went farther, the grey-brown hills of Shihor got closer. These hills were straight ahead, and to the right were the hills of Chogath and Chamardi. The conch-shaped eastern hill of Chamardi reminded me of the story of Dundhalimal, the fakir of Vallabhi. The hills of Shihor looked like they were running towards us; they were in two rows, one behind the other. The front row of the hills looked dark blue-green under the shadow of the clouds. The row behind looked parrot green with the sunlight falling on it. It was a beautiful sight – green hills after the monsoon.

The truck sped past Vartej. It ran for a bit along the Vartej river but meandered away as the river was dry. After crossing the dry river we took the road to Shihor. The thorny thickets of Shihor are green after the rain. The talbajardi shrubs were also blooming. Do you know this plant? It grows in Victoria Park. There is also one shrub between our hindola and the alvi patch, and one near the Buch tree. So many trees and so many flowers!

The truck soon crossed the thicket. It was cloudy so we did not feel the sun. It made the scenery around look more beautiful. We neared the Shihori Mata hill, crossed it and left it behind. We crossed the Shihori river bridge and the truck took the Songadh road, and



drove through Sanosara town and towards the Sandhida Temple located among many hills. The smooth straight road turned into a dirt track. It was bumpy in the truck. A human invention filled with human beings was making its way through the lush green natural environment. To the right we passed gardens filled with yellow, red, pink and white karen flowers. After crossing two stone-built naalas we reached the shrine of Sandhida Mahadev.

It is a simple shrine, with no noteworthy carving or architecture. Next to it is a dharamshala. It is good; four or five rooms and verandas and open spaces. A lot of people come here, especially every Monday in the month of Shravan. There is a large neem tree in the chowk of the dharamshala, with a long and wide platform around it.

Even in this day and age people are fond of telling tall tales and conning others. Here is one. A sadhu

once came here, who had a bad temper. Nobody could disturb him when he was engrossed in his contemplation, or he would pick a fight. Once in a fit of anger he got the small tree next to the neem cut and got the platform built around the big neem. The same night, around ten-eleven o'clock, the drum in the temple started beating by itself. It beat so loud that it could be heard in Sanosara, six miles away. Nobody dared to look and find out who could be beating it so loud. But the sadhu could not sleep that night; the next day he left and went away.

That is a tall story! More possibly the pujari and dharamshala keepers were fed up with the nasty sadhu and came up with this idea to chase him away. But so long as people believe such tales, why would their fabricators not carry on spreading them?

Across from the Shaiv temple there is a kund built from stone. Its water is sweet to taste. The water reflects the leaves of the peepal tree nearby. The kund has water all around the year. Upstream from the kund there is a natural spring and a small river flows from it. The river flows under the kund and then disappears. This is an added attraction for visitors. The priest told us that Sandipani rishi is believed to have lived and meditated here. Seems like Sandipani rishi lived and meditated in so many places, if one goes by the same tale told by priests in many places. There is a Sandipani Ashram in Ujjain, and also quite possibly in Madras. We have a tendency to establish famous rishis in order to add to the attraction of

pilgrimage places; but all we do is to reduce the fame of the rishis.

The temple has pictures from the days of Ravi Varma, of the gods and goddesses and characters from the Puranas. Also Parvati and Ganesh.

The aarti was at twelve o'clock. There was a big crowd of visitors, but the aarti was impressive. The priest must have taken a lot of time over his own appearance. The Shiv idol was topped with a silver mask. Five-seven brahmins and the priest were crowded inside. One blew the conch – it was a pleasant sound. The others played the other instruments and the one with the biggest tilaks carried the aarti tray with its diyas amidst the din. All were blessed. Har har Mahadev!

Then everyone dispersed. There are small flowing streams around the temple and big and small trees. One can see many birds. It is nice to walk around. Vinoobhai started sketching; Bachubhai went off bird watching; some started to play chopat, while others went to rest.

Mashi was in great form. She wore a silk sari and a bindi. She was hosting today's party.

Upendra and his friends went to bathe in the stream, while the ladies chatted.

It was four o'clock by the time we ate, after a long penance in Shiva's abode. After that we all got into our

vehicles and returned to Bhavnagar.

After we got home, only Bachu and Babu made and had some coffee. I was so tired I fell asleep before they had the coffee.

That's all for today. We have just received your telegram about reaching Shantiniketan.

Blessings
From your Gijubhai.

Letter 7

Balmandir, Bhavnagar

Date 5-8-36

Dear Sushila,

Got both your letters. The Shantiniketan folks are the limit! Nandbabu has not replied to my letter; maybe he has been busy with the wedding in his family. Please convey my greetings to him. Also do talk to him about this being your last year. You also try and learn as much as you can, but take care of yourself; also discuss going to Burma.

Anasuyaben must have started her work. Tell her to write. I know that she is a very industrious letter writer, but just a reminder. Both of you look after your health.

This time decide what you would like to learn keeping in mind what you want to do in the future. Learn what will be most useful. And make whatever notes you need to.

I have been telling everyone here to keep their letters ready, and I enclose the ones that are ready. As for the rest you can decide whether they are lazy or industrious, I will not get into that. As is his habit Bachu does his datan while he is on the swing. Tiku washes her face and wanders around the house looking for a napkin after the tea is ready and poured, and Babu is the first one to start helping your Ba. You

will have to excuse her if Babu's letters are irregular.

There is a lot of news. The radio that has come to Mashi's house draws everyone there. Day before yesterday there was music by Barodekar, and Bachu and Babu went off to listen. Last night there was music by some Miyansaheb Khansaheb. They went with great anticipation but it was an anti-climax. There was a lot of disturbance and it distorted the music. When Mashi comes, she can't stop talking about her radio. It gives her a lot of joy and also helps to keep her in good health.

Rakshabandhan has come and gone. There was a laadoo feast at Mama's place and everyone ate to their capacity. No one broke any records. Neither Bachu nor I changed our janoi on this day; not that we even wear one regularly! Mama is a philosopher, he changes his janoi in secret. He wasn't at the feast as he was in Shihor.

These days Bora is preparing the beds for the chilli plants. On Thursday a cow ate up two or three of the plants; the rest are still standing. The ringan seeds have started sprouting but it does not seem as if we will get too many this year. We have brought in a banana bunch which has started to ripen; we have bananas for breakfast. Really it is so good to eat home-grown bananas. These are not like



the ones we get in the market. The fruit is nice to look at, and a joy to the tongue.

The chandni karen is in full bloom. The karen looks like a tree of red divas that swing like a chandelier in the breeze. The jasud next to it is also flowering. Girls are putting the flowers in their braids or their hair buns.

The mango tree and the jasud seem to be competing. The tall mango tree challenges the jasud, "Come on, come on! Look, I am going to reach the sky." The jasud is trying to get as tall, but at the same time is spreading wider.

Next to the jasud is the raat rani. It spreads so much fragrance at night that it engulfs the fragrance of the chameli, mogra, rajni gandha, and the rose. You said that Shantiniketan also has raat rani? Do find out. It is at its peak at night and in the moonlight, this is what we have discovered.

Do you remember the krishna kamal creeper that was under the tree near the raat rani? It was not flowering in the shade of the tree: now it should grow. Its season is just past. The flowers are beautiful and fragrant. Even a single flower fills the room with fragrance. The chameli as usual has new blooms every day and fills the verandah with its fragrance through the jaali. We never did get Babu to sit beside the chameli so that you could sketch her. You should do it there, from your imagination.

The ashaadhi has finished blooming; yesterday was the last bud, and today the last flower will bloom . It lives up to its name – its exit follows that of the month of Ashaadh. So very faithful! The roses have stopped blooming and the shrubs should be trimmed. Even the leaves are looking worn out, and the fragrance has faded.

This is all the garden news. Oh, missed one thing. Just as the banana plants have flowers so do the alvi plants. It is believed that they flower when the plant gets older and is no longer productive. The flowers have no distinct smell. These plants will have to be removed and the bulbs dried, so that they can be replanted.

Now news of Bachubhai. In your absence Bachubhai has become the artist for the Budhvaryu. He is also writing a series on birds; this week is about Babblers.

Babu is not feeling well but continues to carry on her work. She is reading fewer Gujarati novels and more English novels now. She says that she wants to do the London Matric exam and has called for the syllabus from Ceylon.

Tiku's club continues. Last week Tiku, Suman and Ramanbhai went to buy a few things from the funds collected for the club. They treat their club as if it were a big institution. It seems like they are planning to have a festival. Tiku and Suman are teaching songs and dances to Vinu and Savita mashi's girls, they are

training them towards winning prizes in the festival. The training place is the long open veranda near the chakdol in the playground.

They have bought a record of Abdul Karim Khan which they play all the time. Abdul Karim Khan is a melodious singer and so others also do not mind listening. There is talk of buying another record.

Jashiben has come to Bhavnagar for the holidays; Shankerbhai's brother has also come. There was a concert at Gopalbhai's place. The craze for concerts is growing in the neighbourhood, as also the number of gramophones and radios. Sooner rather than later the peace and quiet of our area will be broken and it will sound like the bazaar of Surat.

Today at lunchtime there was also a discussion about Silver Talkies Theatre and Hotel.

Blessings
From your Gijubhai

Letter 8

Balmandir, Bhavnagar

Date 12-8-36

Dear Sushila,

Got your letter. It is good to know that you value the letters from here. Learned from your letter that the French lady has not yet arrived. If you feel it proper, then without much ado, do take the opportunity to learn the French language. Devote the rest of the time to the tasks that you have already taken on.

Babu must have given you some of the news of home and the relatives in her letter yesterday. As she starts writing late at night, it is possible that she may have missed some news.



I am sure that she has not written that there are two new records in the house – Abdul Karim and Saigal. Nor would she have told you that they spend most of their time playing these records.

I myself like Abdul Karim a lot. Omkarnath is also excellent, but when he tries to show off too much technique, I lose interest. This record of Saigal is good, it has songs for Holi. It is non-cinema music so his style sounds different.

Last night Bachu and Tiku were in the mood for Bengali songs. They sang as they swung high on the hindola. No rains now, and the winter breeze has started from the west and the south; it is cool and crisp in the evenings – a nice environment for singing. The air is fragrant with mingled scents of the raat rani and chameli. The only thing missing in the musical mood was the moonlight. You know that it is our custom to put a lantern on the steps and sit on the hindola. The light of the hurricane lantern did not quite suit the scents and melodies – hazy darkness would have been more appropriate, but the fear of snakes led us to compromise somewhat.

The tanmaniya plants under the neem and banana behind the bedroom have grown knee-high and are flowering profusely. They all sway together in the breeze.

The foliage of the neem and peepar behind the house is nice and thick. If you stand near the nala and look, it seems as if our house sits in a jungle. A Shikra came to

the thicket today. The Mynas, Babblers and crows kicked up a ruckus and finally chased it away. The Mynas screamed as if their throats would burst. The crows are noisy and quarrelsome, but not this bad. And when the Babblers set up their cacophony, not just the Shikra, even its father, would get fed up and leave! The Mynas are not just noisy, they can be quite courageous too. The other day when another Shikra had come to the mango tree, a Myna not only called noisily but even took a swipe at it. Don't underestimate the Myna.

Three new bunches of bananas in the garden. There is a huge difference between home-grown and market-bought bananas. Ours ripen naturally and their skin is as thin as paper. The market ones are often ripened with artificial heat, and have thick skins; they are not as sweet either. But people need thousands of bananas every day, and traders send the raw bananas from Mangrol and Chorwad to the cities where they are ripened.

This year there is a bhinda plant in the garden on which grew just one lady's finger. The alvi is almost ready now and a couple of days ago we thought we would make some patraa. The guvar plants have beans, and I am going to tell Bora to pick them while they are still fresh. Tulsibhai has come from Indore to study. He is Maharashtrian. We will get him to make some patal bhaji for us. Wish we could send you some. We have made jhol a few times; you must often be eating that there.

That English monthly magazine Pushp has come from Mumbai. It is edited by Hansaben Mehta and Bhojraj. If you like I can send it to you each time, though I feel the English is too simple for you; you may like to read it in your free time. That list of Bengali newspapers that you gave me – can you try and send one copy of each if you find them? I would like to use them for the Budhvariya.

The new activity of Tiku-Suman's club members is to go for a walk towards the college. The club is quite wisely managing its own affairs. Sumanben's mother Taraben has gifted a few things to the club. I must say that the children are really enjoying the club. They don't have a care in the world. The weather is nice and all are ready to jump and dance. Tiku-Suman are in high spirits.

The ashaadhi flowers are done, and there are no more flowers these days. This year even though Shraavan month is over the parijaat does not have flowers; last year it had started flowering towards the end of this month. Maybe because there is no rain. The parijaat remained thirsty for a spell when Basva had fallen ill. . If the rains do not come, the garden will be ruined. It is still cloudy and humid so there is still



hope. You people seem to have pulled our rainfall to your side; there are floods in the Gomti and so much rain in that part of the country, while here we are in danger of drought, which will be very difficult.

Finally we took the motor from the well and put it on the tank. The water supply is erratic. Madhavjibhai's team is trying hard to cope with the water shortage. Girishbhai's committee is also going back and forth; Gopalbhai, Bhaskerbhai are part of this.

Bora, in great enthusiasm, has planted tuver and vaal, but they may not survive without water. Everyone is talking about the fact that there is no rain, but life goes on. People go to the cinema, keep the seasonal saatam-aatham fasts, we bring out the Budhvaryu, music continues in the Balmandir. But if there is a drought then cattle will die, farmers will suffer, poor people will lose livelihoods and goods will become more expensive. The rich will not be affected, though they will make a fuss.

You must send pictures for Budhvaryu without being reminded. Bachu and Tiku are bravely standing in as artists. Somabhai is too busy, so we cannot hope to get his pictures.

Greetings to Anasuyaben. Tell her to write a letter when she feels like it.

Blessings
From your Gijubhai

Letter 9

Balmandir, Bhavnagar

Date 19-8-36

Dear Sushila,

We received your letter to Babu-Tiku today. Your letter that usually comes on every Sunday has not come. Is it lost, do you think?

Your assumption that Babu-Tiku-Bachu will get back on track after reading your letter is proving correct. You will have to decide based on their letters. You must have already received two letters – one from Bachu and one from Tiku.

Tiku's complaint is valid that she will not write until she gets a personal letter from Motiben; it is best if you write independently to her.

We finished the bunch of bananas several days ago. But there are five new bunches again, which will take about a month to ripen. The bananas that had fallen in the storm have found their way into the kitchen in the form of banana shaak two or three times. Once raw banana chips were also fried. I should not be writing to you about food – I know that your mouth waters and that you do not like your kitchen there.

These days we seem to be having a snake-sighting period. Five snakes were spotted in the past week. The first one, a cobra, was near Dahiben's house. It was

caught alive and thrown into the bushes. The second one was seen near the hindola but could not be caught; it disappeared into the shrubbery. It was not a cobra. The third one was spotted between the chameli and the mogra, near the rajnigandha; that wasn't a cobra either. It was at night. It was already dead and was thrown into the stone well. Bhaichandbhai saw a big snake moving quickly near the children's toilet. One was seen by Chudgar near Nanabhai's office. I am sure Muktamashi will claim that she saw several. One snake was seen near Mama's house, but people either let it go or it ran away. These days everyone carries a light when they go out. People are offering many suggestions on what to do about the snakes.

Surprisingly Mashi is not coming this side, or there would be several hours of discussion on the snake issue.

The tanmaniya plants near the banana plants have grown waist-high; the water from the bathroom seems to suit them. We planted a few near the rose and karen



and they are getting tall like Damu kaka and so are bending from the middle.

We have removed the banana plants that have finished fruiting. Now the termites will turn the remains into dust.

These days Basva is watering the lower garden well, but the roses are not blooming, they too will have to be cut. The mogra is also done. The tagar has now started flowering, the old yellow leaves have been replaced by fresh green ones. The yellow ones were almost golden, a colour that should have been captured on paper with paints. The fragrant white flowers are starting to appear. They rule the garden nowadays. No flowers this year on the parijaat. I am waiting for the time when it sheds mounds of flowers.

The raat rani did not bloom in the dark part of the month. It has sprouted new leaves and buds will slowly appear, and on full moon night the Queen will appear in all her splendour. The absence of raat rani is made up by the chameli; each one likes its undisputed reign. The gulbaas is overshadowed by the tanmaniya, and less prominent in the evening array.

The vaal, marchi and ringan plants are growing – still a while before the flowers and fruits. The valol bean creeper on the neem tree has flowers. Bora says that these flowers will fall and the new ones that come will yield the beans. Who knows why there are two rounds of flowers on the valol. Our Boras are originally farmers so they have good knowledge of

such things.

The gramophone craze seems to have waned. The players have tired of it but they tell each other that the gramophone needs some rest.

Your painting of the woman with the sad face has been put up on the wall. The tempera painting has been given for mounting, and we are looking for frames for the others. Once this is done we will put up new pictures in the verandah.

Babu-Tiku and Bachu had gone to Mama's place to make laadoos for the Bhadarva Amavasya. We had our guest Chudgar, so your Ba and I did not go. Heard that they got into the games of chopat there. Tino only comes sometimes to Balmandir, and even when he does, he has already planned how to run away quickly. He is a clever chap.

No news from the Clubwalas. They were once seen doing their rehearsals in the gallery of the Balmandir. Tiku is busy studying; Babu is after her English, and Bachu his reading and drawing. Tiku is officially one of the artists for the Budhwariyu, and is a help for Bachu.

Last week there was Kana's milk saga. The son of the old milkwali was not coming so we stopped with her and started to get milk from Kana. It started with our getting less milk; then it started coming late and we tried to find out why this was happening. The last couple of days it has been coming on time. Kano,

Lakho and Lakha's mother, all tell lies, and also they get caught. Lakha's mother says that Lakha's father has been down with fever the last three days that is why he is not coming. Lakha says that he did have a mild fever. Kano says that he had a cold and cough. Kana's version seems closer to the truth. But it may well be that he went off to his village for 3 days. When Lakha comes for watchman duty, I have to become his watchman. When I say, "You must come early," he says "Yes, if I can leave early from home." When I say, "You should take a round at night," he says, "I will if I can." When I say, "Lakha, you should get up and come at once when I call you," he says, "Yes, I will if I can get up from the bed." I cannot understand how his mind works. It needs to be studied. There are as many opinions about Lakha in the house as there are members, but everyone agrees that he is stubborn.

These days the dogs have become real pests. Their territorial battles have spread all over. Shankarbhai sleeps with a dando and goes out at night to drive them away. Monghiben once took a crying dog away and left it far away. Bora is constantly driving them away, but Dahiben and company give the dogs refuge in their compound. They are constantly crying and fighting. One mottled dog starts the wailing and the rest take it up and create a real ruckus. Their wails make our hair stand on end. Whenever we try to find the cause of the wailing it appears that there is really no reason. Shankarbhai and Bachubhai are seriously thinking about how to resolve this problem. Some say that they should be taken and left some place far away,

some say that they should be killed. I feel that some medicine should be poured down their throats by which they would only make the minimum noise and sweet noise! They can fight all they want but without making a sound!

That's enough for today. More next time.

Blessings
From your Gijubhai

Letter 10

Balmandir, Bhavnagar

Date 7-9-36

Dear Sushila,

We do get your letters but they are not regular. Everyone is raising objections to this as they have written to you. We like it when your letter reaches us every Sunday afternoon. Do start writing regularly every Wednesday so that this continues.

Yes, it is true that people here (except for me) do not write to you regularly. Your mission to drive this home seems to have succeeded. They seem to have improved now.

As for the news – Bachu, Tiku and I went on a trip with the Balmandir children to Naag Dhadimba and Khokhra, about which they have written to you. Bachu has promised to send you the Travel issue of Budhwariyu to see. It is still being prepared; it promises to be solid and with a lot of variety. All are busy with the write-ups for this. Its artists have still not woken up.

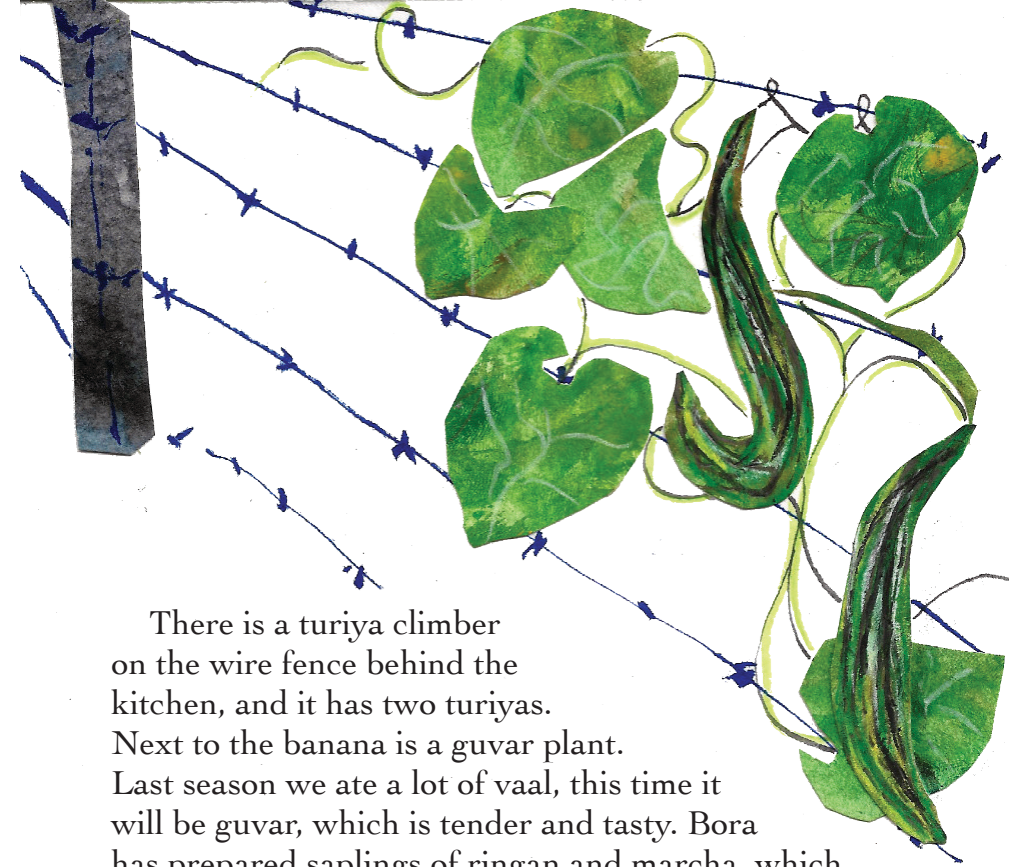
All of yesterday and last night, it continued to rain. I enjoyed the sight and sound of the steady pouring rain. There was no thunder or lightning, nor a pounding deluge. Just a steady, resolute, calm falling of drops. The rain changed from hard to soft as a singer shifts notes while singing.

As it always does, the water entered the house from the west door and collected near the drain close to the gramophone. When too much water collected in the chowk, the mats started floating. Bachubhai went off to open the outlet in the bathroom that we usually keep blocked. He set out with an umbrella in one hand and a long stick in the other. These days he is writing a book titled *The Adventures of Randhir*; perhaps these adventures will feature in it!

Tiku and I are wearing mojdis because of the rain. Bora has made arrangements for drying the clothes inside the house. Our tea-drinking venue shifts back and forth from the store room to the tea room. The kunjo is brought into the house at night. Jakalbai gets soaked as she cleans the utensils. Bachubhai sings a lot of Bengali songs and Babu sings while chopping the bhindo.

The tanmaniya have grown waist-high due to the rain. As the plants had bent over, we removed them today. One of the banana plants with a raw bunch also snapped; we have tied it upright with a rope. Hope that it survives. The rains brought out the big black ants in the verandah last evening. The rain has made the wood damp and it burns slowly in the chulha, giving out a lot of smoke.

It is not raining today. Looks like it is clearing up. The birds have started calling, and everyone is back to their own work. Basva is planting marigolds and Bora is busy with his routine tasks. The light is still a bit dull, the sun is not yet to be seen.



There is a turiya climber on the wire fence behind the kitchen, and it has two turiyas. Next to the banana is a guvar plant. Last season we ate a lot of vaal, this time it will be guvar, which is tender and tasty. Bora has prepared saplings of ringan and marcha, which are growing. There were some caterpillars on the ringan leaves, we are trying to get rid of them by sprinkling tobacco dissolved in water. We have planted coriander next to the ringan and ginger, and potatoes near the guvar and brahmi. It will be fun if these grow. We can eat fresh potatoes. Bora and Basva do all this without being told and with their own understanding and enthusiasm. Bora is good with some things, Basva with some others. We discovered on the trip that Basva is a silent and hard worker. He does not always understand what we say, but his intentions are always good.

Right now the jasud is king, but it went through a difficult period. All the flowers and buds were infested with some insect that gnawed at them and destroyed them. I got all the buds and flowers removed. All the insects flew off to eat the karen flowers, but they soon went away (possibly they found the buds too thick). Since then the jasud has sprouted new buds and flowers; the insects are not back so far. Will wait and watch. You must have seen the small white spider which is the enemy of the roses. We now know that these flying insects are the foes of the hibiscus.

The saru in the front yard is now twice as tall as Damu kaka. When the raindrops cling to its branches and twigs it looks as if it is a tree of pearls. It is difficult to describe in words how beautiful it looks. Simple water drops make such a lovely picture, not one that can be captured on canvas. Nature's drama is astounding and amazing!

Our pariyaat is not doing well. The ones around town are flowering, but not ours. I wonder why this is so.

These days Jakalbai is coming to work. Everyone is impressed with her work and cleanliness. Kana's Lakha is not to be seen nowadays so we miss the fun we have with him. No news of Mashi. Sometimes Bachu, Babu and Tiku go off to listen to the radio. Everyone says that Mashi's radio is World Radio. But Mashi does not listen to English music; she prefers our music.

I am reading a book called A Search in Secret Egypt. It has tales of ghosts and spirits, firasta and kinnars, and magic. Tiku listens avidly to these tales. These are worth reading; whether to believe them or not is up to us.

Bachu is taking an interest in reading the newspapers in the morning. Babu accompanies the vegetable cutting and kitchen cleaning with music, replacing the tanpura with a knife or broom. Tiku, as is her habit, sits somewhere reading her book.

No kitchen news. There is some talk of making patal bhaji and banana flower shaak. We have asked for potatoes from Palanpur. Jhol is taking a break these days. We once had bhajiyas. In short nothing that will make your mouth water when you read. When we made bhajiyas, they seem to have made the mouths of the mice water, and they were up to a lot of mischief. Sometimes a beautiful white cat makes an appearance, but we are not sure how much she contributes to controlling the mice menace. It is difficult to do a population count of the mice.

The territorial fights of the dogs have almost stopped; they seem to have quietened down a lot.

There is a discussion every night that the gramophone should be given a month's rest. All day it keeps playing and no one talks about the intended rest.

Make a print of your new lino and send it to us. We saw the pictures Ravibhai brought. Truly their brushwork is so skilful. I wish you could go to Japan. There would be so much to see and learn in the arts. Nanabhai will be back on the 12th. There will be a lot to find out from him. From his letters it looks like he has seen a lot. Ravibhai is delighted with Japan. It is important that you also go to Burma before you go to Japan. All are well.

Blessings
From your Gijubhai

P.S.: Tiku's club is in full form. They seem to be planning to use the fees to go to the cinema. They may be going this evening.

Letter 11

Balmandir, Bhavnagar
Date 23-9-36

Dear Sushila,

The Wednesday letter has been delayed this time. Thought that I must write today. There is a lot of news, so at times like this one must pick and choose, so I will write about the major events.

The jasud is back to blooming on every branch. The experiment to remove all the flowers and petals to drive away the pests proved to be successful. One never did hear where the insects took off to.

The sprinkling of tobacco water on the ringan was also successful. The insects that were eating up the leaves have gone and new leaves are sprouting; there are also a few flowers. White flowers are also seen on the marchi plant next to it. We are enjoying the shaak made of the tender bhindo from the Karia's and our garden. Just as the vaal ruled last year, this year the guvar is king. Bachu suggests that the surplus pods be dried and kept for frying later. You will get your share from that.

Among the flowers, right now the tagar is ruling. The raat rani sleeps. The chameli seems to be sulking because we trimmed it, and has stopped flowering. Only the tagar and jasud are in full form. The rose is revealing its pink smile. The sight of the snow-white

tagar flowers in the morning fills the eyes; bending down to smell them pleases the nose with their sweet light fragrance.

Kamalben's parijaat has started flowering; there were 15 flowers yesterday. The fallen flowers from Gopalbhai's tree fill at least half of Basva's cap every day. The mound of fallen parijaat flowers are a wonderful sight to behold. We bow to the amazing benevolence of Nature. We give a little water, a little manure and some protection, and She gives us such bountiful returns.

We took the children to Bor Talav. There we saw a spread of fallen flowers beneath the Borsali. Let me know if this tree grows there; if not I will send you some flowers.

As there is a lot of humidity these days, there is also fear of snakes. Suman was bitten but is safe. She stepped on a snake when she went out to the toilet, and was bitten. She is better now, but still in bed and the foot is swollen.

We have taken out the bor bush that was at the back, and are cleaning the undergrowth. Have put Dahya and a daily wager on the job. While they were shifting the stones and rocks, they uncovered six scorpions and they killed them without asking anyone. You know that scorpions usually make their home beneath rocks.

The gramophone is at rest these days. The parijaat flowers are laid out on the gramophone table.

We called Nanabhai for tea, in honour of his return from Japan. We talked of many things – other than Japan. He is going to talk about his trip after the 29th. An exhibition on Japan is also opening on the 29th. It is a one-week programme including talks by Nanabhai and Ravibhai and screening of films from Japan. It will be a busy week.

Bachu is doing his work in the Balmandir as usual. Tiku as per her nature is complaining about the lack of letters from you. Babu is talking about music. Mashi's houses are being repaired so she does not come to give her news. Lakha has started working for Savita mashi, and is looking after the little baby.

Blessings
From your Gijubhai



Letter 12

Balmandir, Bhavnagar

Date: 29-9-36

Dear Sushila,

Got your card. You must have received my Wednesday letter, as well as letters from Bachu, Babu and Tiku. Now you will need to reply to their letters.

The sun is really strong now – as it is known to be in this month of Bhadarvo. The days as well as nights are muggy, but work goes on.

These days everyone is thinking about Nanabhai's programme. The events start today. We have set up a small exhibition of some things that they brought back from Japan, in the primary school, which will be inaugurated today by Ravibhai Raval. Tomorrow is the talk by Ravibhai. Then a series of seven talks by Nanabhai. Am enclosing the printed programme leaflet.

You must have seen Japanese leatherwork. For people who have travelled a lot, these artefacts may not be novel, but they would interest the others. It is clear that the art of drawing is well developed in Japan. Ravibhai has collected a lot of artworks. Being an artist himself it is evident that he made the most of his visit.

Date 30-9-36

Yesterday Ravibhai opened the exhibition. Nanabhai talked about why he went to Japan. The great attraction at the exhibition was the decoration and display by the mali. There were more visitors for the exhibition than the audience for the talk.

A little rain this morning. The sun was in the east and the clouds in the west. The eastern sun rays were piercing the raindrops from the west. Babu was brushing her teeth and said, "It is really a beautiful sight today." Really it was a bit like it is in Panchgini sometimes.

The zinnia bed in the front yard is eye catching. The raat rani seems to have gone to sleep, but the rajnigandha is still awake. The roses seem to be waking up, the mogra is in deep slumber. The tagar is in its adolescence and the jasud in vibrant youth.

Bora is tending the ringan and marchi plants. Planted in a horseshoe shape around the black water drum, they make a pretty sight. It seems as if the effort of watering the maize plant is not going to bear fruit. The tomato plants that replaced the tanmaniya plants are looking hopeful of giving some tomatoes by and by. Bora is not yet able to predict if the valol creeper on the neem tree is likely to bear beans this year.

Bora claims that the fruits on the sitafal tree in the front yard will take two months to ripen. Till then we will look at them every day and the black ants will

wander on them.

We have removed the tank from the tap behind the kitchen. What we should do with that is a matter of debate. One party feels that it should be the container for all the rags that are here and there. The other side feels that it should be used to store valuables. Until some decision is reached the tank prefers to rest under the peepar tree.

Yesterday Bora took down one bunch of bananas. They are really small and not quite ripe. The enthusiasm of the early days over bananas seems to be waning. Nowadays the guvar is growing prolifically on every plant. Much more than we can eat. Someone thought of drying it, and that is what we are doing. They say that it is good when fried.

The parijaat in the garden sheds almost three quarters of a thaliful of flowers, but they are small. This is because the original seeds were of inferior quality. Bora and I are trying to improve it by giving water and fertilizer, but I am not sure if this will make a difference.

Mashi is busy with her house renovation. Nowadays there is not much attention on her radio. Recently Shankerrao Vyas and Master Navrang and others gave a concert in the Dakshin Mandal. Bachu and Babu added their presence to the audience. The next day Shankerrao sang a bhajan (in Bhairavi) in the Vinay Mandir. These people seem to be reducing the respect for their own bhajans by listening to Abdul

Karim and Omkarnath. I am not sure if this is a good thing, but I am sure they are thinking about this.

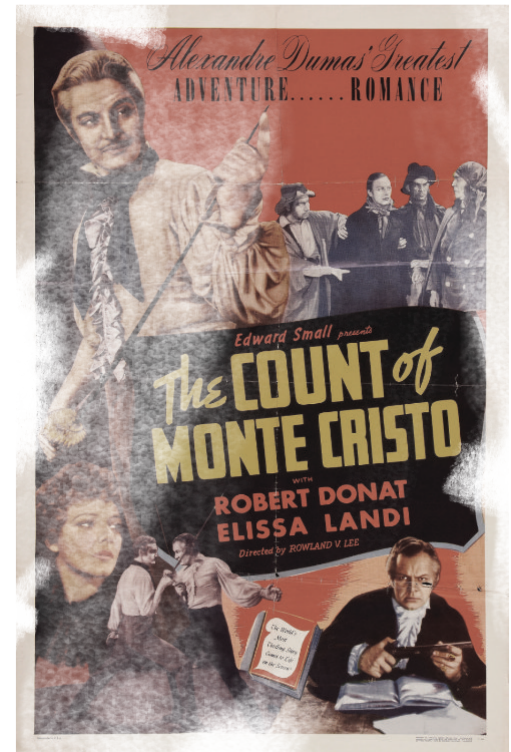
Tiku's club is quiet these days. Suman was bitten by a snake but was saved; she is still bed-ridden, but fine. Tiku visits her as a friend and fellow club member. After Suman was bitten there is more alertness about snakes. We have cut down the grass behind the house, the pile of stones has gone into the pit where it is collecting dust. A special path has been made leading to Tiku's toilet.

Films come and go in town, but there are no great takers for them, so things are quiet. Last Monday Vishnubhai went to see Count of Monte Cristo. He thinks that those who have studied English will like the film.

Dahiben and the other ladies are cooking in their own house instead of the boarding house kitchen. So they can make and eat bhajiyas when they feel like.

No other news.

Blessings
From your Gijubhai



Letter 13

Balmandir, Bhavnagar

Date: 10-10-36

Dear Sushila,

This time you just acknowledged my letter. I expect some writing from you in response to my Wednesday mail.

Yesterday Bachu has written to you. He has informed you how Tiku is feeling hurt. Do write her a nice illustrated letter.

Nanabhai's Japan week celebrations are over. There was good attendance for the exhibition as well as the lectures. It went off better than expected.

The pictures that Nanabhai and Ravibhai brought back from Japan may be ordinary by their standards; nevertheless they are beautiful. I am getting more convinced about sending you to Japan, even if for a visit. Artists do not really need to know the language of Japan. They share the universal language of colours and paintbrushes. The paintings talk and the eyes listen. Sometimes the language of the artist is an obstacle in understanding the art. You can see the pictures that Nanabhai brought back when you come in the summer. Somabhai was saying that he along with his students will try to copy the paintings. That will be a good skill-building exercise for the fingers.

After seeing the Japanese art, I am more convinced about the techniques that we follow in the Balmandir for drawing. The repetition that we allow in the Balmandir builds skill. It is this skill which enables the creative thoughts that play in the mind to quickly take form on paper. This skill is specially needed to create comprehensive art. It is clear that the Japanese have developed these skills.

We also learnt that Japan is a garden of beauty. I am saying this without having visited the country, but I feel strongly that it is so. Some call it the island of birds; some say it is the land of flowers. All this is reflected in its pictures. Art cannot thrive without a natural environment. The fact that along with the Balmandir we have gardens, birds, animals (rabbits), butterflies, is reflected in the childhood pictures that you all drew. The paintings of Abadben and Anjuben include the colours of the hills and clouds around the Balmandir hill. Our own pictures reflect the plants and butterflies here. If this is so, then it would not be surprising if the beauty of Japan was also reflected in their pictures.

Nanabhai has also brought 4-5 records from Japan. Nanabhai's Bachu has brought them today; Tiku, Babu and Bachu are busy playing them. The influence of Western music is evident; I remember reading Dr Cousins on this. Just now they were playing something like a foxtrot. And yet Japanese music is oriental. Another record had notes which sounded like the raag Kafi to me. But we still have to listen some

more.

After the Japan week, people have been finding the evenings dull. Starting today there will be three evenings of programmes related to Gandhi Jayanti. These activities are good for those who are bored in the evening; they find out about new things and it is a good use of their time.

Bright red roses are starting to bloom in the garden. The tagar is getting dull. The pariijaat gives us a thaliful of flowers every day. The raat rani sleeps, but the rajnigandha is awake.

In the tank in the lower garden, a couple of huge frogs remain; the rest seem to have either fled or reached the stomach of the crows or herons.

No signs of snakes these days, but we found a shed snakeskin, almost a foot and a half long, in our bathroom. Last week two centipedes announced their presence.



The beds have been sunned to prevent bedbugs. Not too many mosquitoes, but definitely some around. We do not get agitated when they bite after we are asleep. If they didn't hum so much, we would let them bite even while we were awake.

The shraadh period is on. We do not mark this. We are busy here and we assume that our forefathers must be busy and at peace.

Karia suddenly turned up at midnight, met everyone, and returned to Mumbai. He will be going to Italy to work in his sheth's shop. Tarlaben is working in Jangbar's Girls School on a salary of Rs 40/-. She has written something about a sari. Please write to her, I am enclosing her address.

A bitch has given pups in the coal barrel in the Girls Hostel. We went to see them once. The puppies look weak and sickly. They have not opened their eyes yet. In some time they will be scampering in Karia's jungle. This year there does not seem to be anyone who will look after them.

The dogs were back to their territorial fights early this morning. They scattered when they heard me. But I fear that they are back to fighting. Today the dogs of Bavajini Tekri kicked up a real ruckus; the dogs of the tank gang were not part of today's fight.

Kana's Lakha and Lakha's wife have both started working at Savita mashi's place. They will learn a lot there, even psychology. Lakha's mother will say,

“Lakha’s wife is like a sheep.” Actually his wife looks quite strong, and more intelligent than him.

It is true that Savita mashi’s little girl does not cry. Mama is busy correcting the Matric papers. Tino comes to the Balmandir, but is still most casual. Vinu is studying seriously. Vinu is showing signs of becoming a philosopher, like Mama. Mukta mashi’s houses are almost ready. That is a relief; now the next worry is getting tenants. People need something or the other to worry about, isn’t it?

Mornings are pleasantly cool now. The afternoon sun is exhausting. The evening colours are nice. Night sky is clear and the stars shine.

Look after your health. How are Anasuyaben’s cough and cold? Tell her I enquired. Write all the news.

Blessings
From your Gijubhai

Glossary

<i>Aasopalav</i> : Ashoka tree	<i>Dhoop</i> : Fragrant smoke, incense
<i>Akhada</i> : Playground	<i>Faliya</i> : Front compound
<i>Alvi</i> : Colocasia	<i>Firasta</i> : Angels
<i>Ashaaḍhi</i> : Flower that blooms in the month of Ashaadh	<i>Gulbaas</i> : Four o’clock flower
<i>Bhajiya</i> : Fried vegetables in batter	<i>Guvar</i> : Lond bean
<i>Bhinda</i> : Ladies finger	<i>Gyaastel</i> : Kerosene
<i>Bor</i> : Jujube berries	<i>Hindola</i> : Large flat wooden swing
<i>Borḍi</i> : Bor shrub	<i>Jaali</i> : Trellis
<i>Borsalli</i> : Bullet wood tree	<i>Janoi</i> : Sacred thread
<i>Brahmi</i> : A medicinal herb	<i>Jasud</i> : Hibiscus
<i>Buch</i> : Indian cork	<i>Jhol</i> : Bengali gravy dish
<i>Chakḍol</i> : Merry-go-round	<i>Kachumber</i> : Salad
<i>Chameli</i> : Jasmine	<i>Kalo koshi</i> : Drongo
<i>Choli</i> : A kind of legume	<i>Karen</i> : Oleander
<i>Chopat</i> : A board game	<i>Kerḍa</i> : Caper berry
<i>Chowk</i> : Central open courtyard	<i>Kesuda</i> : Flame of the forest
<i>Dando</i> : Stick	<i>Khakbra</i> : Palaash tree
<i>Darbar</i> : local ruler of the princely state	<i>Khijḍa</i> : Khedaji/Khejri tree
<i>Darjido</i> : Tailor bird	<i>Khodibara</i> : Picket gate
<i>Datan</i> : Mouth cleaning with neem twig	<i>Kinnar</i> : Demi-gods
	<i>Krishna kamal</i> : Passion flower

<i>Kund:</i> Water tank	<i>Rajni gandha:</i> Tuberose
<i>Kunjo:</i> Clay water pot	<i>Ringan:</i> Brinjal
<i>Lobaan:</i> Gum benzoin	<i>Saru:</i> Whistling pine
<i>Lot:</i> Flour	<i>Shaak:</i> Cooked vegetable
<i>Lotas:</i> Brass water pots	<i>Shikra:</i> Small Indian Hawk
<i>Mahendi:</i> Henna	<i>Shraadh:</i> Period to remember and pray for souls of the departed
<i>Marcha:</i> Chillies	<i>Sitafal:</i> Custard apple
<i>Matli:</i> Small earthen pot	<i>Soodi:</i> Betel nut cutter
<i>Methi:</i> Fenugreek	<i>Tagar:</i> Pinwheel flower, crape jasmine
<i>Mogra:</i> Arabian jasmine	<i>Talbajardi:</i> A variety of acacia, babool
<i>Naalas:</i> Culverts	<i>Tanmaniya:</i> Wild balsam
<i>Oomro:</i> A kind of fig	<i>Tuk tuk:</i> Coppersmith Barbet
<i>Osri/oshri:</i> Gallery	<i>Turiya:</i> Ridge gourd
<i>Paat:</i> Long wooden day bed	<i>Tuver:</i> Pigeon peas
<i>Parijaat:</i> Night-flowering jasmine	<i>Vaadi:</i> Garden/orchard
<i>Patal bhaji:</i> A dish made from colocasia leaves and dal	<i>Vaalol and vaal:</i> Types of runner beans
<i>Patraa:</i> Savoury made from rolled colocasia leaves	<i>Vadis:</i> Dried nuggets made from pulses
<i>Peepar:</i> A variety of peepal	<i>Vasant:</i> Spring
<i>Pithlu:</i> Traditional Maharashtrian recipe made from chickpea flour	
<i>Raat rani:</i> Queen of the Night flower	