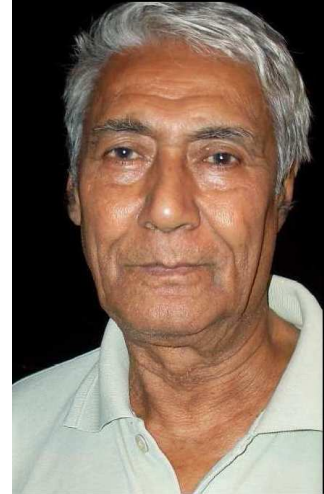


**A White Lie**  
**Gopal Krishna Choudhury**



Many years ago in the distant past of 1946, playing with strips of left-over tin sheets was one of my favourite past-times, besides pencil-sketching. From the strips collected from the backyard of a nearby tin factory, I used to cut out 6-inch, 4-inch and 2-inch long pieces and joined them vertically and horizontally to form airplanes, tanks, battleships and the like. In those World War days when the sky was filled with British and enemy planes, people appreciated these toys. Some of my friends used to take them and sell them at fairs held during festive seasons. The monetary gain was negligible, but the experience was exciting. Over time, the interest faded out but I still remember those days and feel grateful to Dhar Tin Factory (DTF) for providing me with the raw material for my toys at no cost.

I devoted the next few years to my studies and finally appeared for my Matriculation (10+) examination in 1949. After the examination the holidays were really pleasant and I made full use of them by loitering and spending time with my friends. During this period an idea came to my mind. Why not arrange for a competition where sketches by young talents would be judged by a renowned artist and the outstanding ones rewarded! For this venture, first of all, I sought the help of one of my trusted friend, Bishnu, whose residence was in the vicinity of DTF. Since both of us were from middle-income families, we did not have much pocket-money to spare. And in those war-ravaged years, collecting competition-fees from the participants was out of the question.

After considerable thinking and discussions, we first approached the management of DTF to sponsor the exhibition space and the prizes as well as pay for the prize-distribution ceremony. We then requested my neighbour, the printer of Basumati Patrika (a Bengali daily newspaper) to publish the news-item asking teenage boys and girls to participate in the competition by sending sketches of Rabindranath Tagore, not exceeding the size of 30"X 20", drawn in any medium. We, however, decided to pay from our own pocket-money for short advertisements in a few more widely circulated newspapers of the city.

Finally, we decided to have Abanindranath Tagore, father of modern Indian and Renaissance art and a nephew of Rabindranath Tagore, to be the judge for this

competition. As luck would have it, Rabindranath had a villa on Barrackpore Trunk Road, close to our neighbourhood - Baranagar and Noapara- where Abanindranath used to come and spend some time every year. We decided to utilize this opportunity fully.

By the grace of God, all our attempts were successful. The management of DTF promised us the exhibition space, attractive prizes for the best three sketches and expenditure for a grand prize-distribution ceremony. In time, the news-item and the advertisements started getting published and we started receiving entries from far and near. While discussing this plan with my father, I realized that being an organizer of the event, I was not entitled to participate in the competition. I felt sad and pondered over the issue for some time. Then a solution came to my mind. Why not put the name of one of my father's female students on the sketch? If she would win a prize and desired to use it in passing her matrimonial interview\*, this misdeed may be considered simply as a 'white lie'. My objective was to know how good I was as an artist!

Eventually, Tripti, one of my father's students, agreed to submit my sketch as her own for the competition. In all, we received more or less thirty entries which were properly entered into our register. With prior appointment, Bishnu, a few other friends and I went to see Abanindranath. He greeted us with a welcoming smile. I remember at that time he was in his late 70's, and looked like a saint, devoting most of his time writing for children. We showed him the news-item and all the advertisements and explained to him our objective for seeing him. Abanindranath listened to us patiently, asked us to spread all the sketches on the wide first-floor porch of the picturesque villa, while he himself sat on an arm-chair. He bent down thoughtfully to browse through all the sketches, then picked up ten of them. He started examining them in detail. Finally he wrote 'First', 'Second' and 'Third' on three of them and appended his signature on each of them. My heart skipped a beat when Abanindranath wrote 'First' on Tripti's submission! The meeting was a great success and we left after touching this great artist's feet in reverence, and asking for his blessings, which were granted.

On the designated day, the exhibition was inaugurated, and later, a prize-distribution ceremony was held in an appropriate manner. The DTF management appreciated the sincerity and selfless hard work of all the youngsters practically with no means of their own. A rich tribute was paid to Abanindranath Tagore for his love of children and spending his time and energy for the competition's success. In the end, at the request of DTF management, we gladly handed over the best sketch to the local club for its perpetual preservation. After all, it was the local club that looked after the welfare of the community where the factory was located.

During the last few decades whenever I had the chance, I visited the community clubhouse and looked through its window incognito, to steal a glance at my sketch of Rabindranath. At these times, I felt like a mother who had left her new-born forever in a basket at an orphanage, ringing a bell to announce the arrival of a new baby!



A pencil-sketch of Rabindranath done by the author in November 2009 for csinternational; he believes his artistic ability is no longer the same.

**Editor's Notes:**

1. Dr. Abanindranath Tagore, C. I. E., the famous artist of modern India, was born in Calcutta on August 7, 1871, at the Jorasanko residence of the Tagore family. The orientation in the artistic outlook of Abanindranath created a new awakening in India and brought about a revival of the Indian Art which for centuries lay decadent and hidden from the public view. Just as in the period of Renaissance the savants of Europe, after ages of gloom and desolation, discovered the ancient culture, so it was Abanindranath who found out India's lost art treasures. This awakening from darkness and the new understanding which followed, impressed its mark on almost all branches of artistic activity, in painting, sculpture, architecture, book illustration, design, commercial art, lithography, engraving, etc. It may sound strange to many, but it is a fact nevertheless, that Abanindranath had a wide recognition in Europe as an artist of great merit long before Rabindranath Tagore was known there. His manifold and valuable contributions to literature in some of its important branches would rank him as one of the greatest litterateurs of the time. Children's literature specially has received his devoted and affectionate attention. (Excerpt and the picture of Abanindranath from Mukul Dey archives, <http://www.chitralkha.org/abanindranath.htm>)



Abanindranath Tagore

2. Rabindranath Tagore: (May 7, 1861 – August 7, 1941) was a Bengali poet from India, philosopher, visual artist, playwright, composer, and novelist whose avant-garde works reshaped Bengali literature and music in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. A celebrated cultural icon of Bengal, he became Asia's first Nobel laureate when he won the 1913 Nobel Prize in Literature. (Internet)

\* In traditional arranged Indian weddings which connected not just two young people, but their families as well, the marriageable young man's parents and/or other family members usually visited the potential bride in her parental home to see if she and her family would be a good match. Often they asked her about her studies, her hobbies, her domestic skills and other talents; sometimes they would ask her to sing. Some potential bride-grooms chose to include themselves in this "interview panel" and some others let the parents do the initial screening. This is what the author referred to as the 'matrimonial interview'. Believe it or not, in the majority of cases, these unions were happy, although most stories of arranged marriages tend to create a different impression – could it be because it sells? The bride and the groom grew to genuinely love and adjust to one another. Things have now changed, even in traditional-loving India. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, or even the latter half of the last century, nuclear families have mostly replaced joint, extended families, as a result of greater mobility and a preference for individual rather than collective ideal of the younger generation. Young people often choose their spouses themselves, and ask for their families' blessings.