

COLONIAL INDIA IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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sweets, and orders over the top ceremonies that are a “hundred times more elaborate than on other days” (25). On this occasion, Goopy and Bagha dress up as gods wearing “crowns, bangles, necklaces and earrings” (26) and appear before the king who is gullible enough to believe that he is in divine company. Once again, using their magical powers, they lift the king off the ground and carry him off to the kingdom of Halla. During this fantastical flight, the king faints and regains consciousness the next day, only to discover that he has been tricked and captured by the same two peasant boys whom he had once planned to murder. In a reversal of fortune, the king of Halla takes away the kingdom of Shundi from its war-mongering king, and, in a fairytale ending, Goopy and Bagha marry the princesses of Halla and are “given half of Shundi to rule” (27). More significantly, the ending celebrates the ability of weak and subaltern peasant boys to challenge a tyrannical ruler and outsmart a powerful army, and, on another level, debunk the oppressive rules of the Permanent Settlement by becoming land-owners themselves.

Literary Nonsense in Post-*Swadeshi* Bengal

U. Ray's pioneering legacy as a publisher and children's author was carried on by his son S. Ray, who was arguably the greatest of all Bengali children's authors. In *Sukumar Ray: A Legacy of Laughter*, Subhadra Sen Gupta gives us an illuminating glimpse into S. Ray's childhood that included playful anecdotes about S. Ray's early storytelling abilities and sense of humor. Born in Calcutta on October 30, 1887, S. Ray, the second child of U. Ray and his wife Bidhumukhi, was a consummate storyteller from an early age, and had a rapt audience of siblings for whom he would weave humorous tales about “fantastic creatures with bizarre names” (Sen Gupta 5). Like his father, S. Ray joined Presidency College to study science and, in 1910, graduated with honors in Physics and Chemistry. In 1911, he won a scholarship to study printing technology at the London County Council School of Photo-engraving and Lithography, which was followed by another year of study at the Manchester School of Technology. He returned to India in 1913 and joined the family business at a significant moment as U. Ray had just begun publishing the children's magazine, *Sandesh*. Not only did he begin taking responsibility of the day-to-day operations of running a printing press due to U. Ray's failing health, but S. Ray also became the editor of *Sandesh* in 1915, upon the death of his father. In the years that followed, until his untimely death in 1923, S. Ray wrote prolifically for *Sandesh*, and one can make the claim that his efforts—both as a writer and editor—ushered in the golden age of Bengali children's literature.⁶

It was between 1913 and 1923—the post-*swadeshi* decade that witnessed the emergence of Gandhi the leader of the national movement—that S. Ray wrote his most popular stories and poems for children. Interestingly, almost all of S. Ray's writings can be classified as literary nonsense—similar to the

brand of nonsense written and popularized by Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll in the second half of the nineteenth century. A key question to explore when analyzing S. Ray's body of work is why he chose to draw on literary nonsense as a means of communicating with his young audience, to which I offer two answers. First, the ability of civil disobedience to unsettle and disrupt—as demonstrated by the *Swadeshi* movement—I propose has its literary parallel in the genre of nonsense that attempts to turn our conventionally accepted notions of societal order upside down. In a sense, literary nonsense is similar to the strategy of *swadeshi*, in that it emboldens a person to imagine a world that overturns the one in which he or she lives. Both literary nonsense and the *swadeshi* vision allow for the possibility of alternative worlds in which, at least temporarily, dominant societal structures can be challenged and ruptured. Further, Wim Tigges suggests that literary nonsense “maintains a perfect tension between meaning and absence of meaning” (4), and that it typically emerges from a range of meanings in which “the seeming presence of one or more “sensible” meanings is kept in balance by a simultaneous absence of such a meaning” (255). This view is echoed by Michael Heyman, who states that, “Literary nonsense certainly allows for various readings, but the key to its success is that it provokes a simultaneous multiplicity of contradictory interpretations” (“New Defense” 189). The implications of producing a “multiplicity of contradictory interpretations” in a colonial state which attempts to stifle any conflicting or differing opinion cannot be overstated, thereby making literary nonsense an effective means of reviving the *swadeshi* spirit of defiance in an oppressive post-*swadeshi* Bengal. Thus, S. Ray's brand of literary nonsense, which successfully fuses Bengali and British literary traditions, creates a topsy-turvy world which trivializes empire, parodies the laws of the land, and subverts all forms of official power and authority—in many ways, mirrors the most effective phase of the *Swadeshi* movement from 1905 to 1907.

Second, as Robert Darnton's illuminating article on literary surveillance in colonial India shows, in the post-Mutiny era, the British Raj relentlessly catalogued all types of published material by passing the Press and Registration of Books Act of 1867, in an attempt to control and document all aspects of Indian society. The paranoid fear of published material was particularly heightened after the partition of Bengal in 1905 since the Indian press played a key role in fuelling nationalistic *swadeshi* sentiments, and the British Raj clamped down on presses and publishing houses for printing anything that it considered seditious. For instance, the beleaguered government passed the Newspapers Act of 1908, which authorized district magistrates to seize presses of papers they deemed to be too subversive, and the Indian Press Act of 1910, which required press owners to submit a security deposit and empowered magistrates to seize presses that attempted to “both by openly seditious writing and by suggestion and veiled incitement to inculcate hostility in British rule” (quoted in Darnton 155). Darnton outlines how, in the years following the passing of these acts, countless cases were tried as a means to “deter and

repress" (167) and punish any perceived transgressions on the part of presses and publishing houses. In view of such tyrannical measures, S. Ray's use of nonsense was a brilliant strategy to evade literary surveillance and judicial persecution. As the editor of a popular children's magazine, S. Ray cleverly outmaneuvered censorship practices by writing 'nonsense' for children, and had he been tried for sedition and treason for it, his trial would have ended up being as ridiculous as the trial of the Knave of Hearts in Wonderland.

In her seminal exploration of literary nonsense, Elizabeth Sewell suggests that, far from being "a denial of sense" and a "random reversal of ordinary experiences and an escape from the limitations of everyday life into haphazard infinity," literary nonsense is a "carefully limited world, controlled and directed by reason, a construction subject to its own laws" (5). Thus, the "sense school of criticism" ("New Defense" 187), as Heyman puts it, was started by Sewell and, subsequently, Marlene Dolitsky, Wim Tigges, Jean-Jacques Lecercle and others have echoed her basic assumption that there is a great deal of deliberate sense in literary nonsense. What is of interest to me, in the context of this chapter, is the notion that literary nonsense generates a calculatingly crafted and logical world, rather than one that has been randomly put together by its creator. S. Ray's nonsensical vision is therefore not only founded on a great deal of sense, but it is also important to note that there is nothing accidental or unintentional in his self-fashioned nonsensical worldview. Surely, while poking fun at English-loving Indians or the oppressive rules of the Raj, S. Ray would have been greatly aware of the implications of his whimsy and humor and its energizing impact on Bengali children.

Arguably, one of S. Ray's finest accomplishments was to introduce his young readers to a vast body of original literary nonsense in Bengali. In his introduction to Sukanta Chaudhuri's translation of *Abol Tabol*, renowned film director Satyajit Ray gives us a glimpse into the creative world of his father, S. Ray, who looked to the nine *rasas* of Indian dramatic theory to name his "special vein of nonsense the [*kheyaal*] *rasa* or spirit of whimsy" (v). More recently, in his introduction to a groundbreaking anthology of Indian nonsense, Heyman, echoing Satyajit Ray's observations, also notes that S. Ray wanted nonsense to be "accepted as a serious Indian art" (xi) and devised the notion of the tenth *rasa* or "*kheyaal rawsh*" ("Indian Nonsense" xli). As Heyman writes: "*kheyaal rawsh* . . . refers to a fundamental classification of Indian aesthetic theory, that of the *rawsh*, or *rasas*, . . . (a word which also has the meaning of taste, the 'essence' of something, as well as living liquids like sap and juice)" ("Indian Nonsense" xli). He goes on to elaborate: "Each *rasa* corresponds to one emotional effect: love, anger, the comic/happy, disgust, heroism, compassion, fear, wonder and peace. All serious art must evoke combinations of these *rasas*" (Heyman, "Indian Nonsense" xli). Thus, by formulating a tenth *rasa*, Ray attempted to give a degree of seriousness to his art and, as Heyman argues, it had a dual aim: to "distinguish the nonsense form from other Indian literary forms" ("Indian Nonsense" xli) and to Indianize literary nonsense and

differentiate it from British literary nonsense. Once again, a testament to the fact that, under the veneer of lightheartedness, Ray took both his craft and his Indian consciousness seriously enough to formulate a distinctive theory of Indian nonsense.

At the same time, the British literary influences working upon S. Ray cannot be overlooked. As Sukanta Chaudhuri writes: “Lewis Carroll is clearly a major presence, above all in the comic tale of *Ha-Ja-Ba-Ra-La*. Edward Lear’s influence is less specific but none the less real” (“World of Sukumar Ray” 88). Satyajit Ray has also acknowledged that while there had been “imaginary animals in old Bengali nursery rhymes,” it is the “weird creations of Lewis Carroll or Edward Lear” (“Introduction” iii) that more closely resemble S. Ray’s absurd characters. Drawing on Homi Bhabha’s influential formulation about the subversive power of mimicry, in the previous chapter I have suggested that, in *The Jungle Books*, the Bandar-log are mimic men who are deemed as threatening precisely because they use “stolen words” (59) to disrupt the laws of the jungle. Based on a similar premise, consider the subversive possibilities of mimicry at work when an English-educated Bengali children’s author consciously draws on British literature to create nonsense: not only is he a member of the group of “minutemen” who have rejected the intermediary role conceptualized by Macaulay, he is also someone who artfully uses British literature—which, in the nineteenth century, had been pedagogically deployed in India to create a sense of reverence for British ideals—to mock the very principles that he has imbibed through his colonial education. Significantly, he selectively chooses Lear and Carroll for his literary inspiration—authors who were, in their own way, at odds with a Victorian England that had helped shape the defining ideologies of post-Mutiny British rule in India.

Ultimately, I wish to propose that S. Ray is unequalled in fusing British and Bengali traditions to fashion a hybrid form of literary nonsense that was uniquely his own creation: one which seamlessly blends the rich oral cadences of Bengali *chharas* (folk rhymes) with the wit, humor, and irreverence of nineteenth-century British literary nonsense. He is also able to identify and build on common literary links: S. Ray liberally uses puns, alliteration, and onomatopoeia—figures of speech which can be found abundantly in Bengali rhymes and in British literary nonsense. Further, his nonsense animals, be it the Lug-Headed Loon or the Pumpkin-Puff, greatly resemble imaginary creatures found both in the world of Bengali *chharas* (such as Hatti Ma Tim Tim) and in Lear’s nonsense books (such as the Dong and the Jumblies). It is important to consider what function such a hybridized form of literary nonsense might serve in colonial Bengal. Turning, once again, to Bhabha’s formulation in *The Location of Culture*, of the empowering nature of textual hybridity—which has the potential to dislocate and transform oppressive colonial binaries—one can certainly read S. Ray’s hybrid nonsensical works as a superb articulation of native resistance which seeks to dilute authoritarian

and watertight colonial constructions. Further, by absorbing British literary nonsense into Bengali children's literature, and assimilating it into one's own tradition, as it were, S. Ray dilutes the 'foreignness' and so-called superiority of British textual authority, and makes it accessible and approachable for his young readers. One can hardly underestimate the strength of such textual assimilation and inclusion as, arguably, it can go a long way in the process of dismantling textual and other colonial binaries of the British Raj.

The Patriotism of *Abol Tabol*

S. Ray is best known for *Abol Tabol*, a superb collection of fifty-two pieces of nonsense verse that he compiled from his writings that had previously appeared in *Sandesh*. Although S. Ray did not live to see the finished product—he died nine days before it was published—it was a labor of love, undertaken in failing health, which spoke of his deep commitment to humor and social commentary. Satyajit Ray notes that S. Ray was so passionate about publishing *Abol Tabol* that “he had designed from his sick-bed the cover in three colours, the lay-out, some short rhymes as space-fillers and the illustrations for the tail-pieces” (“Introduction” vi). *Abol Tabol* features fifty-two pieces of Learian nonsense verse with illustrations, largely about fantastical animals (like the Lug-Headed Loon or the Griffon) and odd adult behavior displayed by batty uncles and grumpy old men, which seemingly have very little to do with the national movement; however, on closer inspection, a number of these poems reveal S. Ray's nationalistic sentiments. One of the main characters S. Ray caricatures in *Abol Tabol* is the British-loving Indian, and he mocks this figure repeatedly. In “The Customs of Bombagarh,” S. Ray makes fun of the monarch of Bombagarh and his court for blindly following traditions that are clearly foreign and out of place in India. The poem is also a dig at the native Indian princes who, especially in the wake of a middle-class-led national movement, displayed tremendous loyalty to the British crown. Denis Judd has noted that, when confronted with nationalistic pressures, the British tried to “rally the loyal and conservative elements in the country: the princes, men like the Maharajahs of Bikaner and Hyderabad, who had so much to lose if the Raj collapsed, and who ruled a third of the country” (117). After the Mutiny of 1857, the native states, as I recount in the chapter on *Sonny Sahib*, were gradually brought into the British fold and, although they were semi-independent entities officially ruled by a native prince, they typically had a British representative ‘advising’ them on important matters of state. Among the most visible displays of their allegiance to the Raj was their strong showing at the Delhi Durbar (1877), a pageant-like event in which Queen Victoria was proclaimed Empress of India. And such exhibitions of sycophantic loyalty by native states only got stronger as the national movement gained in momentum. Often, the native princes and their families attempted to imbibe British

mannerisms by hiring private English tutors and governesses (such as Miss Derek in *A Passage to India*), and played games like cricket to mimic the British aristocratic set.

“The Customs of Bombagarh” is composed as a series of mock rhetorical questions that ask the child reader to reflect on why the inhabitants of Bombagarh display absurd behavior. For instance, S. Ray ridicules the blind imitation of Western fashions by asking why the Queen wears “a pouffe on her head” or why the people of Bombagarh “Rub rouge in their eyes by the light of the stars” (*Select Nonsense* 22). He goes on to mock copied food habits as he wonders why “they pickle their watches in whey” or “fry mango jelly and frame it with borders?” (22). The ludicrous order to enclose mango jelly with boundaries can also be a reference to the redrawn borders of Bengal in 1905, which despite being reversed in 1911, continued to exist as a fault line as it become a touchstone for the official border of India and East Pakistan in 1947 (and Bangladesh in 1971). S. Ray leaves his readers in no doubt that all is not well in Bombagarh as, “Musicians walk muffled in blankets of state” while the “king sits and howls like a fox in the court” (22), a clear indication of repressive state censorship. Not only is freedom of speech—for everyone but the king—suspended in this bizarre state, but the hope for justice is also doubtful as: “On his [the king’s] lap the Chief Justice thumps pitchers for sport”



Figure 5.1 S. Ray’s illustration of the king’s aunt playing cricket in “The Customs of Bombagarh.”

(22). The members of the king's family, however, remain indifferent to the state of affairs as they continue to enjoy life and indulge in Western-oriented pastimes: "the king's aunt plays cricket with pumpkins for balls. / Her brother goes waltzing, with hookahs adorned" (22). S. Ray ends the poem by gently, yet firmly, drawing the reader's attention to the fact such behavior ought to be questioned: "But what does it mean? Could we please be informed?" (22). The mock figure of an Anglicized Indian is also apparent in "*Tyash Goru*" (Limey Cow), a satire about an English-loving cow, and Heyman has briefly noted the "anti-colonial streak" in this piece ("Indian Nonsense" xxxvi).

The Bengali *babu*—who features prominently in Kipling's works for being callow and feckless—also finds himself at the receiving end of S. Ray's satire, albeit for different reasons. Judd writes that the "most potentially difficult Indians in the late-Victorian era were the educated 'babus,' . . . [since] they had been transformed into brown Englishmen, but in practice were denied the chance to get the best administrative jobs in their own country" (103). Lord Mayo, viceroy of India from 1869 to 1872, epitomizes the derisive attitude of the British towards the *babus* when he declares: "In Bengal, we are educating in English a few hundred Babus at great expense to the State. Many of them are well able to pay for themselves and have no other object in learning than to qualify for government employ" (quoted in Judd 104). Due to the resentful stance adopted by senior British officials in India—many of whom were also responsible for shaping pedagogical practices—the odds were often stacked against Bengali boys who wished to pass school and university examinations, as is evident in "A Marriage Is Announced." In this poem, the groom's "scholarly accreditations" include the fact that "He tried full nineteen times to get / His Junior School Certificate," and S. Ray writes mockingly that one must "admire the young man's patience" (5). In spite of a high failure rate, the colonial educational system not only produced aspiring civil servants, but also lawyers, doctors, journalists, scientists, and other professionals, many of whom were denied lucrative jobs on the basis of their race and alleged incompetence. While a great number of these disenfranchised educated professionals went on to join the national movement, many of them became petty officials—or *babus*—in the colonial bureaucracy, and S. Ray makes them the butt of his satire. In "The Purloined Moustache," the "Baboo at the Central Works [who] seemed always mild and mellow" (4) becomes hysterical with rage because he believes that his moustache has been stolen. When it is pointed out to him by his colleagues that his moustache had "not shrunk the least iota," he "really hit the roof, and screamed to all the writers, / 'I don't believe a word you say—I know you lying blighters'" (4). In what is a comic imitation of how the colonial state functioned when dealing with alleged crimes and misdemeanors, he proclaims: "I'll murder any slanderous rogue who dares to say it's mine. / And so he took his ledger book and charged them all a fine" (4). He goes on to write an irate "memorandum" which describes the office staff as being as "thick as planks" (4), and proclaims that one "mustn't ever give 'em rope, [but] be

taciturn and harsh” (5), ironically mimicking attitudes often expressed by the British about the native *babu*. Of course, by centering the entire poem on the alleged loss of a mustache, S. Ray is able to underscore how absurd and vacuous petty bureaucratic jobs were in reality, while simultaneously poking fun at the Bengali *babu*'s incensed behavior as an inconsequential government official. The poem ends with the “Baboo at the Central Works” (4) declaring: “It’s whiskers, now, that make the man, and they are our lord and masters” (5). By leaving the ending equivocal, S. Ray enables the reader to come to his or her own conclusions: either the *babu* is trivializing the British—who, in reality, were the lords and masters of India—by comparing them to facial hair; or, the *babu* has clearly lost his sense of balance and his perception of things as a result of his dull and meaningless job at the Central Works.

In *Abol Tabol*, S. Ray also emboldens his young readers by presenting them with the possibility that India could permanently rid itself of the British Raj—an unimaginable proposition before 1905. In “Infant Joy,” he writes about two adult-looking bold and brazen infant boys with ravenous appetites



Figure 5.2 S. Ray’s illustration of the “Baboo” in “The Purloined Moustache.”

who are able to devour, as it were, British rule. While one child has a penchant for unconventional behavior which includes “smashing bottles with his slate,” the other seems to know no fear as he “crawls up cupboards to the top, / Or climbs the bed and takes a flying drop” (29). They also have exceptional food cravings as “They won’t have milk, but want to crunch on pebbles,” and, one of them, not unlike the brave little tailor, “captures flies and munches them with relish,” while the other devours highly combustible “candle-ends and matches” (29). S. Ray ends the poem by expressing a suitable amount of awe at their extraordinary appetites and their display of sheer might which becomes daunting enough for Uncle Tom—a common epithet for the British—to flee in trepidation: “Dear Uncle Tom [the British] will scarce survive such feasts. / . . . They snarl and puff: the down upon their head / Turns red with rage— poor Uncle flies in dread” (29). Sukanta Chaudhuri has pointed out that one of S. Ray’s influences was Rudolph Dirks’s comic strip, “The Katzenjammer Kids,” created in 1897 for the Sunday supplement of the *New York Journal* (“World of Sukumar Ray” 88). Inspired to a great extent by Wilhelm Busch’s *Max und Moritz* [*Max and Moritz*] (1865), the well-known German children’s stories about disobedient law-breaking boys, “The Katzenjammer Kids” featured the adventures of Hans and Fritz, twins who undermined all forms of authority, in particular, their Mama (their mother), der Captain (the shipwrecked sailor who was their surrogate father), and der Inspector (the school representative). The young children in “Infant Joy” are clearly modeled after Hans and Fritz, and what is significant is the manner in which S. Ray writes admiringly of their disregard for socially sanctioned norms and behavior. In colonial India, where notions of what was acceptable and unacceptable were



Figure 5.3 S. Ray’s illustration of the bold infants in “Infant Joy.”

rigidly defined by the Raj, the little boys seem heroic and courageous in their appetites, their rage, and their ability to strike fear in the British.

As noted in the previous chapter, British rule in India was defined by the passing of a number of bills and laws in order to maintain power, suppress dissent, and showcase the legitimacy and authenticity of British governance. In fact, so far-reaching was the impact of some of these legislative measures that Sinha has persuasively outlined how pivotal some of these late nineteenth-century laws were in spawning notions of an ‘effeminate’ Bengali and ‘manly’ English identity in colonial India. In “The Rule of Twenty-One,” S. Ray seeks to unfetter his young readers from such colonial constructions by poking fun at the laws of the land. Even though he does not shy away from describing some of the harsher penalties that are deployed by the colonial state, he undercuts their potency by being flippant about why a person can find himself or herself at the receiving end of oppressive laws. Significantly, he refers to India as “Lord Shiva’s native land,” and states that laws passed in this land “are hard to understand” as one can be arrested for the most trivial of reasons: “If you trip and come a cropper / You’re collared by the nearest copper” (18). And, of course, the justice system is a travesty as “The magistrates upon you seize, *And fine you twenty-one rupees*” (18; emphasis in the original). Playing on the randomly chosen number twenty-one, S. Ray goes on to elaborate, in the next five verses, how



Figure 5.4 S. Ray’s illustration parodying colonial laws in “The Rule of Twenty-One.”

arbitrary laws can be, and how punishment is handed out for the most absurd of reasons. For instance, one “need[s] a special lease / Till six o'clock to cough or sneeze,” and those who sneeze without proper authorization “Are thrashed in gentle admonition, / *And twenty-one compelling doses / Of snuff rammed up their streaming noses*” (18; emphasis in the original). A “loose tooth,” “whiskers grown in sundry manners” (18), and a “snore” (19) can all lead to severe corporal punishment. Another ploy that S. Ray adopts in this poem is to address the child reader directly in the second person: “If strolling forth, you ever chance / To right or left to turn or glance, / They send a message to the King” (19). And, of course, there are consequences for even the most harmless look: “His scouts ride forth to haul you in, / And stand you in the mid-day sun / *To drink of cups full twenty-one*” (19; emphasis in the original). “You”—the informal *tumi* in Bengali—is not only a personalized and direct form of address, but it is also emphasizes the fact that the capricious laws of colonial India can apply indiscriminately to everyone, and no one is considered too young to experience such measures. And yet, by making laws and rules the subject of exaggerated mirth, he simultaneously undermines the degree of respect and fear that such laws ought to inspire in colonized subjects. In this poem, S. Ray also seems aware of the severe censorship artists can face in such an environment: “There are people who indulge in verses / [and] Are caged up straight with muttered curses” (19). More absurdly, “They're made to check through grocers' tills / *And work out twenty-one long bills*” (19; emphasis in the original). Yet, as is evident in this cheeky reference to literary surveillance, S. Ray does not shy away from churning out verses that ridicule the tyrannical state of affairs in colonial India.

The Bengali Wonderland

In *Ha-Ja-Ba-Ra-La (A Topsy-Turvy Tale)*, one can clearly discern the influence of Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) on S. Ray, as well as the manner in which he Indianizes the story in order to enable his young readers to reflect on the topsy-turvy predicament of colonial Bengali society. As Satyajit Ray writes: “The finest piece of nonsense in Bengali prose, the *Tale* is obviously influenced by *Alice in Wonderland*. There is the same falling asleep on the grass; the same dream; the same pageant of known and half-known beasts and humans; the same hits at linguistic lapses, social customs and legal procedures; and finally the return to reality. Yet nothing could be more quintessentially Bengali than the latent spirit of this topsy-turvy world” (“Introduction” vi). Thus, Carroll's ironical portrayal of Victorian England in the *Alice* books—which cleverly used wonderland as a euphemism to mock mid-nineteenth-century social and legal mores—clearly inspired S. Ray to view the governing principles of his own fettered society through a satiric lens. At the same time, as Satyajit Ray is quick to point out, S. Ray is able to recast the story into a “quintessentially Bengali” mould, thereby creating an

idiom which is not a hollow replication, but a uniquely vibrant articulation of colonial resistance and subversion.

As with the opening scenes of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, in which Alice, in her dream, follows the White Rabbit through a hole into wonderland, S. Ray's *Tale* begins with a young boy feeling hot and drowsy and hallucinating that his handkerchief has transformed into a tubby ginger cat. The cat, whose characteristics are not unlike the elusive Cheshire Cat, not only "snigger[s] in the most irritating manner," but also confuses the young boy with a series of slippery statements about going to Tibet to escape the heat of Calcutta such as: "Straight roads, an hour and a quarter's drive—just say the word" (*Select Nonsense* 47). On being pressed by the boy to show him the way, the Cat quickly calls upon the fantastical Cousin Treehopper who, of course, cannot be found so easily either. The young boy, who, like Alice, is initially bewildered and confused by his new environment, begins to grow in confidence and shows his irritation towards the Cat: "You are talking nonsense, and I'm getting quite bored" (48). As with the *Alice* books, in which Carroll emboldens a young girl to speak her mind, S. Ray similarly emphasizes the ability of the boy to resist adult-speak and articulate an autonomous point of view, which is not only a new development in Bengali children's literature, but also one that is infinitely liberating to a colonized reading public. In fact, unlike the *Alice* books, the young boy narrates the *Tale* directly to his readers and repeatedly uses the first person 'I' to refer to himself; that the story is not filtered through an adult narrator makes his voice and opinions all the more ubiquitous and persistent through the course of the narrative. So much so that—using Sinha's persuasive argument that adult male Bengali identity is effeminized and emasculated by the British in the closing decades of the nineteenth century—Satadru Sen goes so far as to claim that in S. Ray's works, "The child, significantly, is the only sensible Bengali amidst all this laughter: as the amused observer of the powerless, inauthentic and awry universe of the urban adult, the child functions as a newly created repository of masculine dignity." As is the case with nineteenth-century British and Anglo-Indian children's literature, which seeks to empower the young English child over the weakened Indianized Englishman, S. Ray, too, foregrounds the Bengali child (over the adult) as the more rational specimen.

Once the Cat disappears "over the garden wall with a smirk on its face" (48), the boy meets the Crow, a chartered accountant—clearly a disaffected member of one of the new professions generated by colonial education—who revels in word-play, number-play, distortion, and exaggeration. Playing with the notion of time (and mirroring another vital feature of the *Alice* books), the Crow mockingly asks the young narrator: "Don't you count the cost of time in your country?" (49). The Crow then proceeds to tell the young boy how important it is not to waste time: "Time's terribly expensive here, we daren't waste one little bit. Here I had scraped and scrounged a bit of time together, and now I've lost half of it talking to you" (49). The pompousness

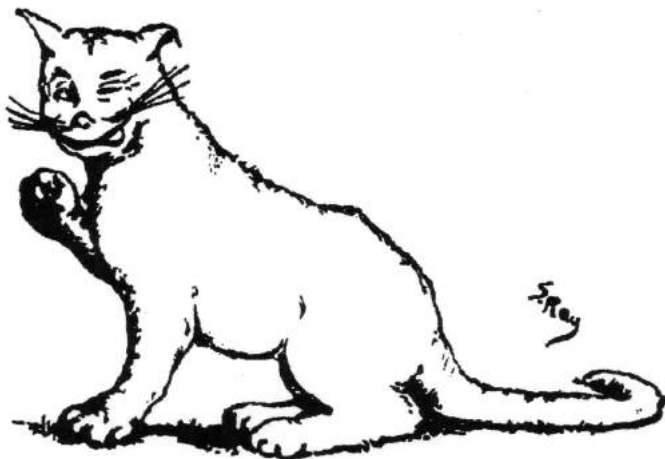


Figure 5.5 S. Ray's illustration of the Cat in *A Topsy-Turvy Tale*.



Figure 5.6 S. Ray's illustration of the Crow in *A Topsy-Turvy Tale*.

of the Crow's statements and his supposed devotion to work, however, get undercut by the fact that he is utterly inefficient in maintaining books for his clients and doesn't ever seem to get their accounts ready on time. The influence of the *Alice* books is, once again, apparent in one of the Crow's clients, a little old man with a green beard who, like the Caterpillar in *Wonderland*, not only has a hookah, but also asks the narrator if his "age is increasing or decreasing" (50) and dismissively informs him that he will not age as "we turn our age back when we're forty" (51). Thus, normative markers of the 'real' world—such as age and time—are just as easily dismissed in the *Tale* as they are in the *Alice* books, thereby encouraging the young reader to question some very basic assumptions of his universe. Absurd little tales with no beginning or ending, nonsense rhymes, mathematical puzzles, and a procession of peculiar creatures like Higgle-Piggle-Dee—"part man, part monkey, part owl, part goblin" (54)—who laughs raucously all the time, Grammaticus Horner, a bearded goat who claims to be a nutritional consultant, and Smoothpaste, a bald man who sings incessantly, are also woven into the fabric of this exaggerated and irreverent Bengali dream-world.

At the core of this story lies a trial of the most absurd proportions, the origins of which can, no doubt, be traced back to the trial of the Knave of Hearts in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, but, in my opinion, can also be read in the context of what was going on in the courtrooms of colonial India in the first two decades of the twentieth century. In the previous chapter, I have shown how in the late nineteenth century—as a response to the burgeoning national movement—the British set in motion a legal machinery in India that attempted to consolidate colonial authority in a manner which did not allow British interpretations of the law to be challenged by colonial subjects. The open rebellion that the Raj encountered in Bengal following the 1905 partition—arguably, the most potent outburst of collective public defiance since the Mutiny—made the British even more arbitrary and heavy-handed in their dispensation of justice. Although the British passed the Morley-Minto Reforms of 1909, in an attempt to placate the more moderate and conciliatory Indians leaders, their efforts to arrest and punish seditious 'agitators' did not abate; in fact, their attempts to bring people to 'justice' were further intensified between 1908–12, when more radical and revolutionary methods (such as bomb plots and assassination attempts on British officials) had replaced mass action (such as boycotts and protests). Interestingly, imperial policy in India—committed, in theory, to the rule of law and justice for all—dictated that the arrested be given a trial, and, as Darnton writes: "the British used trials. . . . to demonstrate the justice of their rule to the "natives" and, even more important, to themselves. If the Raj could not be identified with the rule of law, it might be seen to rule by force" (167). Consequently, the courtrooms became a site for the British—who, in reality, were using terrible force to crackdown on dissenters—to showcase their sense of justice and fair play. In practice, however, in spite of the elaborate show of justice exhibited by the Raj, the trials

were largely ceremonial and the outcomes were predetermined in favor of the colonial state. The arrival of Gandhi in India from South Africa in 1915 further intensified the dynamics of the colonial courtroom as it was to become even more of a proxy battlefield. Gandhi—a lawyer who staunchly believed in nonviolent methods—readily courted arrest in an attempt to counter British policies, and his involvement in local peasant rebellions—most famously in Champaran (1918) and Chauri Chaura (1922)—made him a frequent visitor to the police stations and courtrooms of colonial India.

Not surprisingly, in the *Tale*, the legal shenanigans of the Raj become a rich source of material for S. Ray, who, in Carrollian fashion, presents us with a trial of the most outlandish proportions. Presided over by a Screech-owl, a judge who is given to “nodding and drowsing quite openly,” the trial pits two lawyers—a Crocodile and a Fox—against each other as they argue about a charge of libel made by a “sniffing and crying” Porcupine (58). The Crocodile, who represents the Porcupine, is not above histrionics as he begins proceedings by poking “his eyes with his claws until he’d squeezed out a few tears” in order to “look as sad as possible” (58). His public display of mock sorrow is followed by an opening statement in which he expresses a desire to get to the “root of the matter” (58), but puns on the word “root” in order to digress and talk about yam, an edible root. In response, the Fox jumps up and proclaims that “the yam is a toxic and execrable weed” (58), which in turn results in the trial disintegrating into a farcical display of how arbitrarily justice is handed out by the courts. For instance, when asked by the Crocodile to produce “witnesses or documentary evidence of the charge,” the Porcupine randomly points to Smoothpaste as the bearer of “all documents” and the Crocodile reads out rude little songs from Smoothpaste’s songbook as evidence (58). Witnesses can be easily bought as the Crocodile asks Higgle-Piggle-Dee if he would like to be a witness in exchange for “four annas in good money” and the latter is “only too pleased to get the money” (60), which is a clear comment that petty corruption is rife in the legal system. Ultimately, chaos ensues as there is “a regular stampede for the witness-box, as it seemed that witnesses were being paid good money” (61), and, in the midst of this confusion, the owl—who had been drowsing through much of the trial—decides to deliver a verdict only to realize that while he has a plaintiff, no one has actually been accused of libel. However, this important omission does not halt the legal juggernaut as “they quickly hustled poor Smoothpaste into being the accused” (62). As S. Ray writes in mock despair: “The silly fellow thought the accused would also get some money, so he happily agreed. Instead he was sentenced to three months’ imprisonment and seven days’ hanging” (62). At this point in the narrative, just when the young boy is about to protest the “unfair sentence” (62), he is woken up by his uncle who yells at him to stop daydreaming and learn his grammar instead.

Although the *Tale* ends with the narrator being rudely shaken out of his dream-world by an irate adult who dismissively declares, “Nonsense, my boy.

You're making up stories out of some silly dream you've had" (62), the young boy still holds on to the world that he has just emerged from. As he asks the reader: "Could I have been dreaming? But honestly, when I looked round for my handkerchief, I just couldn't find it; and there on the wall sat a cat preening its whiskers, who scurried away as soon as I caught its eye. And just then a goat began bleating beyond the garden fence" (62). The readers of the *Tale* are clearly assumed to be young and open to a world that an unimaginative adult—caught up in a structured world of grammar and formal colonial education—is unable to appreciate or access, which in turn enables the narrator to share his story with them. In fact, the very last line of the *Tale* addresses the young reader directly: "But you aren't very old as yet, so I thought I'd tell you all about it" (62). Thus, it is the child—both inside and outside the text—rather than the adult—who is able to question some of the very basic assumptions of the 'real' world by exercising perceptiveness and imagination that is denied to the adult.

'A Legacy of Laughter'

In this chapter, I have drawn on two of S. Ray's most well-known works; however, he left behind a body of children's texts—most of which were published in *Sandesh*—that showcase his sense of humor and his irreverence towards British rule in India. For example, in a series of school stories, S. Ray creates the much beloved character of Pagla Dashu (Daft Dashu)—a seemingly madcap schoolboy who always gets the better of his classmates and teachers. Spoofing on the notion that colonial education creates a class of feckless brown *sahibs*, in "Dashu the Dotty One," Pagla Dashu makes a fool of his classmate Jogobhondhu—the teacher's pet who is excessively earnest about learning English—by exchanging the latter's Grammar Book with a book entitled *Inspector Famous—A Hair-raising Detective Drama*. When the English teacher asks Jogobhondhu for a copy of the Grammar Book, he unwittingly hands him the adventure story that in turn earns him a good scolding from the irate teacher. On another occasion, Dashu arrives in school wearing trousers that are "as baggy and shapeless as pyjamas" and a coat that "looked like a huge pillowcase" (*Nonsense World of Sukumar Ray* 134), caricaturing, no doubt, English dress and mannerisms. When asked by his classmates why he is dressed in such an outlandish manner, Dashu replies in a tongue-in-cheek manner: "Why, to improve my English" (134).

S. Ray also penned and serialized the diary of the fictitious Professor Heshoram Hushiar (loosely inspired by Arthur Conan Doyle's Professor Challenger) whose expeditions in the Karakoram uncover—although there is never any hard evidence made available by him other than the diary entries—a number of prehistoric creatures with pseudo Bengali-Latin names like Hanglatherium (*hangla*: greedy) and Chillanosaurus (*chillana*:

to shout or scream). Professor Heshoram Hushiar (Cautious Chuckleonymous), as his name suggests, is a larger-than-life personality who is spoofed mercilessly by S. Ray in the editor's notes that preface the journal entries. In the entry dated June 26, 1922, sent from "Karakoram, ten miles north of Mt. Bundakush" (*Nonsense World of Sukumar Ray* 158), the editor's mock apology is included for the (child) reader's benefit: "We have published various stories on ancient animals in Sandesh; but nowhere have we mentioned his [Professor Heshoram Hushiar's] hunting stories. Truly, this oversight has been a grave injustice. We knew nothing of those tales, until Professor salvaged some parts from his hunting diary and sent them to us. We are printing extracts from the very same. Whether they are fact or fiction is something we leave to your discretion" (158; emphasis in the original). In another editor's note, S. Ray includes a conversation between two office boys at the printing press who poke fun at the Professor's nephew, Chandrakhai (Swallowmoon), who joins him on his expeditions: "A boy at our printing press said jokingly, 'What saurus are you then?' Another said, 'He's a Talltaleosaurus—he sits around and tells tall tales'" (171; emphasis in the original).

Further, in a scene reminiscent of Hurree Babu's account of his adventures in *Kim*, Chandrakhai recounts to the editor how the expedition ends: "You cannot imagine the storms in that far land. . . . It was unbelievable! Compasses, maps, notebooks—nothing remained. If you hear how we finally managed to return, your hair will stand on end like a porcupine's quills. Hungry, lost, blindly guessing which way to go, it took us all of three months to cover what should have taken two weeks" (171). When asked by the editor if there was any proof of their travels, Chandrakhai replies: "I am here, in person,



Figure 5.7 S. Ray's illustration of Professor Heshoram Hushiar and his expedition party in the Karakoram.

so is my uncle, what more proof could you want? And here, I've drawn some pictures for your magazine; you're welcome to consider these to be proof as well" (171). The educated Bengali *babu* is, once again, made a mockery of by S. Ray, but unlike Kipling's Hurree Babu—who dreams of becoming a member of the Royal Society and clings on to his ethnological paraphernalia—the Professor's blundering ways and uncalculating aspirations seem far removed from the disciplined display of loyalty shown by Hurree Babu towards the British Raj.

In this chapter, I have suggested that Bengali children's literature comes of age in the early decades of the twentieth century against the backdrop of the national movement largely due to the efforts of the Rays. Responding to the call of *swadeshi*, the Rays produce a rich body of writing with the dual aim of entertaining and empowering Bengali children living under colonial rule. They refashion the fettered world of the Raj and create a parallel universe in which colonized Bengali children can—at least in their imaginations—as Sukanta Chaudhuri puts it, “reign as kings and creators, [and as] purveyors of joy and wisdom” (“World of Sukumar Ray” 96).