

COLONIAL INDIA IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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Chapter Five

Trivializing Empire

The Topsy-Turvy World of Upendrakishore Ray and Sukumar Ray

On October 16, 1905, Lord Curzon partitioned Bengal—the cradle of British rule in India and the birthplace of the Bengali intelligentsia—by proclaiming that it was administratively prudent to divide such a populous and geographically unwieldy entity into two separate states. One of the main reasons for this split, however, was to undercut the influence of the educated Bengali *bhadralok* (gentleman), a varied group of upwardly mobile middle-class professionals, minor bureaucrats, and servicemen who, as Dipesh Chakrabarty puts it, had “warmly embraced the [European Enlightenment] themes of rationalism, science, equality, and human rights” (4) in the nineteenth century, and were increasingly campaigning for reform and representation within the colonial state. The desire to rein in the growing power of this emergent group, who had become increasingly nationalistic (and anti-British) as the new century dawned, is clearly evident in the British Home Secretary Herbert H. Risley’s declaration in 1904: “Bengal united is a power; Bengal divided will pull in several different ways” (quoted in Sarkar, *Modern India* 107). An auxiliary aim of the partition, based on a cynical policy of ‘divide and rule,’ was to create a predominantly Hindu West and a Muslim East in order to showcase the fact that, far from having a united national movement, India was a deeply fractured subcontinent in need of British rule. The attempt by Curzon to redraw the boundaries of colonial Bengal resulted in a prolonged period of civil disobedience and chaos, which in turn changed the temper of the Indian national movement dramatically after 1905. Bengali nationalists who, prior to the partition, were largely conciliatory in their efforts to engage with the British were now increasingly willing to challenge British rule with various acts of civil disobedience. At the heart of this new style of protest was the *Swadeshi* (of our country) movement that called for the boycott of British products and institutions in favor of Indian ones. As Shekar Bandyopadhyay writes, the

Swadeshi movement emphasized “self-reliance, village level organisation and constructive programmes to develop indigenous or swadeshi alternatives for foreign goods and institutions” (255). Thus, the mood in Bengal was one that not only celebrated all things homegrown and local, but also one that was defiant towards all forms of official authority. This attitude, I propose, filters into the children's stories written by Upendrakishore Ray and his son, Sukumar Ray. Although a handful of Bengali children's texts had been published in the nineteenth century, and there was a strong oral tradition of storytelling and rhymes, the Rays, in the spirit of the *Swadeshi* movement, gave Bengali children a written literature of their own.¹

In previous chapters, I have argued that British and Anglo-Indian children's texts respond to key historical moments in nineteenth-century colonial India in an attempt to contain the fault lines of the imperial project. In keeping with the overarching argument of this book, this chapter continues to explore how children's texts respond to momentous historical events in colonial India; however, instead of looking at texts that are written to consolidate empire, I focus on children's literature that resists and debunks Britain's empire in India. More specifically, I read U. Ray's *Tuntunir Boi* (*Tuntuni's Book*) and *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne*, and S. Ray's *Ha-Ja-Ba-Ra-La* (*A Topsy-Turvy Tale*) and *Abol Tabol* (*Rhymes without Reason*)—fashioned by early twentieth-century colonial history, especially the *Swadeshi* movement—as anti-colonial texts that seek to empower Bengali children living under colonial rule.

Swadeshi or, How to Oppose the British

Before discussing Bengali children's literature, however, it is useful to briefly consider the historical background of the *Swadeshi* movement (1905–1911). By the 1890s, there was a growing realization that the methods favored by the moderate leaders of the Indian National Congress, who used prayers and petitions, wrote articles and made speeches—in an attempt to reform suppressive colonial policies—were largely ignored by colonial government. The British tended to reject Congress-led reform initiatives as elitist, by claiming that they lacked the mandate of all Indians, as epitomized in Lord Dufferin's statement in 1888 that the Congress leaders represented a “microscopic minority” (quoted in Bandyopadhyay 217), and in Curzon's assertion in 1900 that the Congress was “tottering to its fall” (quoted in Sarkar, *Modern India* 96). This dismissive attitude of the British officials, in great measure, resulted in the nationalists—largely a group of educated, city-bred Indians, many of whom were Bengalis—looking for ways to mobilize *all* Indians, peasants and the working class in particular, to participate in the Congress-led national struggle. Interestingly, the educated middle-class nationalist turned to non-Western paradigms in order to articulate an easily comprehensible resistance

to colonial rule. The grassroots appeal of folk culture and folklore as a way of making the more complex issues of reform and political liberty intelligible to the common man was explored, as was the use of Hindu mythology to evoke nationalistic passions and notions of a glorious Indian past. In 1893, for example, Bal Gangadhar Tilak turned a local festival in honor of Ganesh, the elephant-god, into a forum for anti-British rhetoric. The triumvirate of more extremist Congress leaders—Tilak, Aurobindo Ghosh, and Lala Lajpat Rai—also formulated the concept of *Swaraj* (self-rule) by vowing to get rid of British rule and to revive in India the imagined splendors of a golden Hindu past. However, the early attempts to define a new Indian consciousness by drawing on indigenous cultural, political, and economic alternatives were, perhaps, best articulated in the *Swadeshi* movement.

Although the *Swadeshi* movement, a precursor of the more effective Gandhian model of mass civil disobedience, failed to capture the entire nation's imagination, alienated a large section of the Muslim population, and by 1908, had disintegrated into political extremism and revolutionary terrorism, its impact on Bengali society, as Rajat Ray and others have argued, was, nevertheless, remarkable. Marking a clear break from the founding principles of the Indian National Congress that called for mutual regard and corporation between the Indians and the British, the *Swadeshi* movement was grounded in the principles of boycott, self-reliance, and defiant resistance. On July 17, 1905, Surendranath Banerjea gave the initial call for the *swadeshi* boycott, and a more formal boycott resolution was passed at a mass meeting at the Calcutta Town Hall on August 7, 1905. This led to marches, demonstrations, *hartals* (strikes), and to the picketing of government offices, schools, courts, and shops, and a large number of Bengalis vowed never again to buy British merchandise. One of the main goals of the boycott was to reduce Indian dependency on British manufactured goods that, according to the leaders of the *Swadeshi* movement, was the reason for India's backwardness as it debilitated local industry and prevented India from becoming economically self-reliant. The *Swadeshi* movement, that was encouraged by Congress leaders like Tilak on a national level and was piloted in Bengal by "a new generation of leaders" (Sartori 271) like Aurobindo Ghosh and Bipin Chandra Pal, was initially so successful that "by 1906, imports of foreign cotton yarn and cloth into Bengal had fallen by 25 and 40 per cent respectively" (Copland 44), thereby striking a blow to the exploitative economic practices of the British Raj.

Ultimately, however, as Sumit Sarkar's seminal study, *Swadeshi Movement in Bengal*, points out, despite its initial successes in Bengal, and the fact that the partition of Bengal was revoked in 1911, the *Swadeshi* movement and its brand of resistance had its limitations. For instance, at the annual meeting of the Indian National Congress in Surat in 1907, moderate leaders, who were still willing to engage with the British in order to bring about reform, and were unwilling to embrace the increasingly revolutionary and militant

aspects of *swadeshi*, were able to isolate the extremists like Tilak and Ghosh who wholeheartedly supported the more vitriolic aspects of the movement. Further, as the movement began to take a violent turn by 1908, resulting in random acts of terrorism, leaders who had been initially supportive of it began to distance themselves from the *swadeshi* cause. In addition, the movement was localized to Bengal and its popular rhetoric was largely conceptualized around Hindu images; therefore, despite the efforts to mass-mobilize, sections of the population, like the Muslims and the peasantry, did not join the movement in significant numbers. By 1908, as a result of a British crackdown, many of its more fiery leaders went into self-imposed or compulsory exile. Ghosh disengaged himself from politics and retreated to Pondicherry to establish a spiritual ashram, Pal left for England, and Tilak, who supported the cause from his base in western India, was imprisoned in a Rangoon jail for six years in 1908 for sedition. Lastly, in an attempt to pacify the moderate wing of the national movement, the British attempted to make a few token concessions by passing the Indian Councils Act of 1909 (Morley-Minto Reforms) that provided for very limited self-government for their disaffected colonial subjects.

What is of interest to me, in this chapter, however, is not so much an analysis of the successes and failures of the *Swadeshi* movement as an exploration of the influence it had on Bengali children's literature, as it came of age in post-partition Bengal. Although conceptualized in terms of political and economic opposition to British merchandise and institutions, the *Swadeshi* movement also sparked a cultural revival that celebrated all things Bengali. A countless number of songs, poems, plays, pamphlets, and tracts were written from 1904 onward to mobilize public opinion and generate solidarity with the *swadeshi* cause. For instance, one of the main supporters of the *Swadeshi* movement was Rabindranath Tagore, the doyen of Bengali literature, and although Tagore became increasingly disillusioned with the violent turn that the movement took by 1908, which is best reflected in his novel *Ghare Baire* [*The Home and the World*] (1915), he made speeches, wrote numerous pamphlets, and composed songs and poems with the aim of infusing a spirit of unity and patriotism in all Bengalis.² In his *Swadeshi Samaj* (1904) address, he famously outlined a proposal for a self-reliant Bengali *samaj* (community) based on the work ethos of traditional Indian villages. Tagore also conceptualized the notion of *atmasakti* (self-strengthening) as a means of attaining individual self-sufficiency and self-reliance. Among Tagore's many *swadeshi*-inspired compositions, perhaps the most well-known is the evocative anthem, "Amar Sonar Bangla" ["My Golden Bengal"] (1906), in which he stirringly expresses his devotion to his golden homeland of paddy fields and mango groves.³ However, I propose that it is in the emergence of Bengali children's literature in the early decades of the twentieth century, spearheaded by U. Ray and S. Ray, that one witnesses a superb articulation of the *swadeshi* vision which called for indigenous methods of self-actualization.

The Beginnings of Bengali Literature

While it would be an exaggeration to claim that there was no Bengali children's literature in print before 1905, the earliest published children's texts were largely didactic and instructional in scope, and were byproducts of Bengal's encounter with British colonial rule. The early nineteenth-century colonial educational policies, supported by progressive Bengalis like Ram Mohan Roy, who wished to reform Bengali society through the medium of mass education, led to the establishment of schools and colleges, which in turn necessitated the publication of textbooks for use in these institutions, particularly at the primary level. The Calcutta School Book Society, a publishing house run by native scholars and backed by British Orientalists, was established in 1817, with the primary aim of writing and publishing text books and supplying them to schools. Early titles published by the Calcutta School Book Society include: *Nitikatha* [*Conduct Tales*] (1818), comprising eighteen didactic stories and widely viewed as the first children's book in Bengali; Tarachand Datta's *Manoranjanetihas* [*Pleasurable History*] (1819); Raj Kamal Sen's 1820 translation of a collection of Sanskrit fables *Hitopadesha* (*Counsel with Benevolence*); and Radha Kanta Deb's *Bangla Siksha Grantha* [*An Instructional Book of Bengali*] (1821). In fact, as Provash Ronjan Dey points out, Bengali children's literature has its "roots in . . . text books and in the domain of education" (1), and these early texts aimed at teaching moral lessons in addition to "[the letters of the] alphabet, essays, Grammar, History and Mathematics" (2).

Another factor that contributed towards the publication of Bengali children's texts was the so-called Bengali renaissance, an intellectual awakening ignited by contact with Western ideals and education, which sought to reform and rejuvenate Bengali language and culture through much of the nineteenth century. Ram Mohan Roy's vision of an enlightened Bengali society, which I have briefly touched upon in the chapter on *Little Henry*, greatly influenced Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, the Sanskrit scholar, educator, reformer, writer, and philanthropist, who did much to simplify and modernize the Bengali language in the mid-nineteenth century. Vidyasagar created modern Bengali prose by building on the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century foundations left by the Fort William *pundits*, the Baptist missionaries, Ram Mohan Roy, and the Calcutta School Book Society, and encouraged fellow-educationists like Akshay Kumar Datta and Madanmohan Tarkalankar to do the same. Vidyasagar penned *Varna Parichay* [*Know your Alphabet*] (1855), an alphabet book that is still used by Bengali children today, and wrote several instructional textbooks for school children that were mostly translations of existing works in Sanskrit and English. Tarkalankar's primer, *Shishusikha* [*Lessons for Children*] (1850–1855), which included poems for children, and Datta's *Charupath* [*Pleasant Road*] (1855–1859), consisting of an eclectic blend of scientific and patriotic essays, are among the other notable mid-nineteenth-century instructional books in Bengali.

Any account of an early history of Bengali children's literature cannot ignore the impressive number of children's magazines published in Bengali, particularly from the 1870s onward. In his pithy overview of Bengali children's literature, Dey credits the Baptist missionaries for publishing *Digdarsan* (with an English title of *Magazine for Indian Youth*) (1818), a pioneering monthly magazine for children, whose "chief object[ive] was to impart lessons . . . on Science and History" (22). The Calcutta School Book Society began publishing *Paswawali* (*On Animals*) in 1822, with a view to "propagate scientific knowledge about animal life" (Dey 23). Interestingly, each decade saw the publication of a new children's magazine—*Jnanoday* [*On Knowledge*] (1831), *Pakshir Britanta* [*On Birds*] (1844), *Vidyadarpana* [*Mirror of Knowledge*] (1853), *Satyapradip* [*Truth and Light*] (1860)—all of which had the goal of shaping the empirical and moral consciousness of a modern Bengali child. However, it was from the 1870s onward—the decades that witnessed the birth of the Indian national movement—that Bengali children's magazines came of age, infusing its pages with a spirit of patriotism. As Satadru Sen writes, "Beginning in the 1870s, the Bengali press had articulated a desire to construct its experimental terrain of childhood, i.e., a juvenile periphery of its own that might resist, overlap, complement or render redundant the histories and geographies of Bengal that were produced by British writers." Children's magazines such as *Balak-Bandhu* [*Friend of Children*] (1878), edited by the social and religious reformer Kesab Chandra Sen, *Aryakahini* [*Noble Stories*] (1881), *Sakha* [*Friend*] (1884), *Balak* [*The Child*] (1885), and *Mukul* [*Flower-bud*] (1895), to name some of the more popular ones, sought to educate, entertain, and politically awaken their young readers by publishing an eclectic blend of scientific and historical essays, travel pieces, short stories and poems, and brief news synopses. Some of these pieces were penned by literary luminaries like Rabindranath Tagore and U. Ray, who attempted to foreground a patriotic middle-class Bengali perspective in their writings. The publication of Bengali children's magazines continued to flourish well into the first half of the twentieth century, and emerge in part from late nineteenth-century "middle class attempts to articulate a politically charged world of children's knowledge" (Satadru Sen). In fact, U. Ray, who had contributed prolifically to various children's magazines, began publishing his own hugely popular magazine *Sandesh* in 1913, of which he was the founding editor until 1915, the year he died. *Mouchak* [*Beehive*] (1920) was another notable early twentieth-century children's magazine that published politically engaged material for Bengali children.

The interest in Indian folklore, especially towards the end of the nineteenth century, also played a dominant role in developing Bengali children's literature. For the British, scarred by the Mutiny of 1857, the late nineteenth-century efforts to record Indian folktales was directly tied to the Foucaultian idea of acquiring knowledge and exercising power through incessant classification and documentation. For Bengalis like Rabindranath Tagore, Jogindranath Sarkar, and U. Ray, on the other hand, it reflected a newly emerging consciousness (subsequently

articulated in the *Swadeshi* movement) that celebrated homegrown traditions and narratives. As in the case of the Brothers Grimm and their collection of German folktales, these efforts aimed at appealing to a collective Bengali identity grounded in folk culture, while addressing a dual audience of children and adults. It is important to qualify, though, that some of the earliest collections of Indian folktales date back to the late eighteenth century, and were largely byproducts of Orientalist scholarship moulded by Warren Hastings's view that "every accumulation of knowledge, and especially such as is obtained by social communication with people over whom we exercise a dominion founded on the right of conquest, is useful to the state" (quoted in Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest* 28). The early Baptist missionaries, whose proselytizing the East India Company officials regarded with suspicion, also published a few translations of folktales in an attempt to better understand native traditions and the people they hoped to convert. However, it was in the late nineteenth century that the tradition of collecting folk tales and rhymes truly flourished in Bengal, setting the stage for the publication of original folktales for children by U. Ray.

In particular, Rabindranath Tagore's validation of folklore—echoing the romantic nationalism of the British Romantic poets who glorified children and common folk as embodiments of purity and innocence—ignited an interest in compiling Bengali folk tales and rhymes. Tagore began collecting folklore from around 1883 (Mukhopadhyay 40), and the establishment of *Bangiya Shahitya Parishat* (Bengali Literary Council) in 1894 gave him a forum from which to encourage others do the same (Mukhopadhyay 66). As Suchismita Sen notes, Tagore's initiatives resulted in "a spurt of activity in the editing and publishing of folk songs, folktales, and nursery rhymes during this period" (2). Pioneering efforts to collect popular children's folk tales and rhymes by Jogindranath Sarkar, an educator and publisher, resulted in *Hasi-O-Khela* [*Laughter and Play*] (1891), drawn largely from Bengali folk and fairy tales, and *Khukumonir Chhara* [*Rhymes for Little Girls*] (1899), a collection of folk rhymes. Rabindranath Tagore inspired his nephew, Abanindranath Tagore, a renowned artist, to write "Khirer Putul" ["The Condensed-Milk Doll"] (1896), widely considered to be the first original fairytale in Bengali. Other collections of folktales aimed at children, notably Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's *Thakurmar Jhuli* [*Grandmother's Bag*] (1907), also reflect this trend of gathering and publishing Bengali oral folktales and fairytales in the early 1900s. However, I suggest that it was U. Ray who shifted the focus of Bengali children's literature by not just transcribing folklore, but also using it as a creative source to write a substantial number of original Bengali stories for children.

U. Ray's Early Influences

In her whimsical biography of her uncle, Lila Majumdar, a renowned Bengali children's author herself, describes how U. Ray spent his childhood in

Mymensingh (now a part of Bangladesh) surrounded by “rivers and pools and forests,” with a population comprising “elephants, tigers, crocodiles, jackals and other beasts and birds and [of course] the villagers” (33). Not surprisingly, the rural villages of eastern Bengal, alive with enduring traditions of oral storytelling—and far removed from the bustling imperial city of Calcutta—became a source of inspiration for a large number of U. Ray's stories. As U. Ray writes in his introduction to *Tuntunir Boi*: “as the evening falls and children fall asleep without taking their supper, women of East Bengal tell these stories to them to keep them awake” (quoted in Dey 15). In fact, in *The Autobiography of An Unknown Indian* (1951), Nirad Chaudhuri's charming account of his own childhood in turn-of-the-century Mymensingh—filled with rich oral traditions—is not dissimilar to the type of idyllic childhood experienced by U. Ray. However, even though U. Ray evoked the jungles and tigers of a timeless Mymensingh repeatedly in children's stories, his stories, I propose, equally reflect the milieu of colonial Bengal. U. Ray moved to Calcutta as a young man after winning a scholarship to attend Presidency College, and proceeded to befriend some of the most remarkable Bengali men and women of his age. Among his closest acquaintances were the members of the Tagore family, including Rabindranath Tagore, whose home, the famed *Jorasanko Thakur Bari* (Tagore House in Jorasanko), was the meeting place of artists, social reformers, political leaders, and other pioneering Bengalis who, following in Ram Mohan Roy's footsteps, were deeply committed to the idea of a socially reformed and modern Bengal.

U. Ray's own efforts in developing a modern sensibility in Bengali society lay in the field of printing technology. As a student at Presidency, he displayed a keen interest in science, which in turn resulted in his life-long experimentations with block printing, photography, and photo-engraving. Although he received no formal training, he was committed to changing the quality of print and illustrations available in Bengali magazines and papers, and began to study British printing and engraving techniques in order to become a printer and engraver. His self-taught choice of profession was greatly fuelled by the fact that illustrations, particularly in children's magazines—to which he had begun contributing short stories based on Hindu myths and legends—were “adaptations from foreign originals” (Majumdar 17), and lacked authenticity as British scenes and faces were typically tweaked to look more Indian. Enthused with the spirit of late nineteenth-century nationalism that was consciously promoting the use of indigenous images, U. Ray's aim was to make the illustrations more realistic and appealing to Bengali children. It is interesting to note that, in an era that privileged *swadeshi* ideals, Bengali artists also returned to local paradigms for inspiration, as is evidenced in the paintings of Abanindranath Tagore—a close acquaintance of U. Ray—who pioneered the so-called Bengal School of Art.

There has been a considerable amount of scholarship on colonial Bengal, undertaken by Partha Chatterjee, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Mrinalini Sinha and

others, that has focused on the evolving roles and aspirations of the Bengali *bhadralok*—products of Macaulay’s “Minute”—who initially served as a link between the British and the Indians masses, but whose increasing disillusionment with the colonial policies gave rise to their nationalistic sentiments. As I have noted earlier in this chapter, the anti-British attitude in the late nineteenth century, nourished by burgeoning nationalism, often tended to display signs of Hindu revivalism, whereby the splendors of an imagined ancient Hindu past were emphasized. U. Ray, in spite of having a deep regard for British science and technology (so much so that when he founded his publishing house, U. Ray and Sons in 1895, he imported all the equipment and machinery from England), was unmistakably a member of this increasingly disaffected *bhadralok* class in Bengal, who were looking for alternative indigenous modes of expression. Thus, by the 1890s, in a city teeming with patriotic Bengali reformers, nationalists, ideologues, journalists, and authors—many of whom were his close friends and relatives—U. Ray, a block-making expert and publisher, was also unmistakably touched by the cultural and religious revivalism which foreshadowed the *Swadeshi* movement. Although a member of the progressive Brahmo Samaj, which rejected certain practices prevalent in Hindu society, U. Ray’s earliest works for children—*Chheleder Ramayana* [*Children’s Ramayana*] and *Chheleder Mahabharata* [*Children’s Mahabharata*] (1894)—accessible translations of the epics, emerge in part from the Hindu revivalist mood in 1890s Bengal (and India) which extolled the virtues of ancient Hindu texts and customs as being superior to Western (British) ones. At the same time, as most contemporary historians of the period agree, late nineteenth-century Bengal was a vortex of competing consciousnesses, with modernity often conceptualized simultaneously in terms of an ancient Indian past and Western progressiveness. U. Ray’s interest in scientific inquiry—for which he looked to post-Darwinian Britain—also resulted in a beautifully illustrated little volume about extinct animals entitled *Shekaler Katha* [*Tales from the Past*] (1903), complete with “dinosaurs, tyrannosaurs, pterodactyls and monstrous fish” (Majumdar 31). His audience—the middle-class Bengali boy learning about his world—was thus encouraged to return to a double past in U. Ray’s early works—an ancient Indian one and a pre-historic one—and was expected to display a curiosity in both the scientific and spiritual matters.

Majumdar’s portrait of her uncle shows him to be a man who was not overtly political but, nevertheless, was deeply sympathetic to the nationalist cause and was cognizant of the momentous times in which he lived. For instance, he regularly took his own children to *swadeshi melas* (fairs)—organized to instill in the masses a sense of pride in local handicrafts, products, and inventions (Majumdar 28). To protest the partition of Bengal, U. Ray, a talented violinist, joined Rabindranath Tagore in street demonstrations, and provided the musical backdrop to Tagore’s stirring compositions (Majumdar 42). Not surprisingly, the *Swadeshi* movement left an indelible impression on U. Ray, as it did on many of his contemporaries, including Rabindranath

Tagore, and, like Tagore, he was troubled by the more violent and revolutionary aspects of the movement. I propose that its effect on U. Ray's works was twofold: on the one hand, his post-partition literary output was homespun and rebellious towards all forms of authority, thereby honoring the basic values of *swadeshi*; on the other hand, his rejection of the more violent phase of the *Swadeshi* movement—conceptualized around terrorist attacks and vitriolic Hindu revivalist rhetoric—created a more secular and humorous vision in his writings. Unlike his early works, which are largely abridged retellings of Hindu epics, his later writings reflect the more inclusive and earthy world of Bengali folklore.

U. Ray's Post-*Swadeshi* Children's Stories

In *Lokashahitya* [*Folklore*] (1907), a collection of essays celebrating folklore, Rabindranath Tagore proposes that folklore is a vital source from which an uncorrupted and unadulterated Bengali cultural identity can be accessed. Mirroring the trends found in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century European romantic nationalism, Tagore, from the 1880s onward, focused on the centrality of folklore as an authentic transmitter of Bengali customs and traditions. As described earlier, his validation of folklore encouraged others to compile and collect folktales; however, it was not until U. Ray published *Tuntunir Boi*, that the first collection of original children's folktales was published in Bengali.⁴ What sets U. Ray's tales apart is the fact that although they are set in a seemingly timeless, rural Bengal, they allegorically convey the state of affairs in colonial Bengal with a great deal of accuracy to the discerning reader. And even though his stories largely describe Bengali characters, be it child or animal, some of the more oppressive and powerful protagonists, I propose, can be read as allegorical representations of the British in India. U. Ray also used simple, everyday Bengali spoken by children, rather than the more complex prose of 'high' Bengali, which made the tales lively and accessible to children. U. Ray also introduced his young readers to a range of characters, the most popular being Tuntuni—a clever little tailorbird who uses wit and ingenuity to undercut all forms of official oppression—and who was, without doubt, an empowering figure for Bengali children living under colonial rule.

It is worth considering, for instance, the encounter between the king (who, not surprisingly, like India's colonial rulers, is both authoritarian and tyrannical) and Tuntuni in "How the King Lost his Nose" as it highlights the ability of an unarmed yet quick-thinking bird's ability to escape punishment and death. Tuntuni finds a gold coin in the king's garden and sings out aloud: "*The wealth the king has, I too have it!*" (*Magical World* 106; emphasis in the original). Initially amused by her song, the king gets increasingly furious that Tuntuni possesses a gold coin and tells his men to get it back from her. Once again,

Tuntuni, not unlike the Bengali journalists and pamphleteers who could not be silenced by the 1905 partition and the drain of wealth from colonial Bengal, sings: “*What a greedy king, he takes Tuni’s money away!*” (107; emphasis in the original). The king attempts to placate Tuntuni by returning the gold coin, but Tuntuni, emboldened by her success, taunts the king about being cowardly, which results in the king declaring to his soldiers: “Go catch her, I’ll fry and eat her!” (107). The king’s desire to consume Tuntuni, archetypical of monstrous eating patterns in folktales, also reflects the extreme nature of the king’s disciplinary and punitive actions, and can be regarded as a metaphor for disciplinary measures found in colonial Bengal, particularly as a reaction to the *Swadeshi* movement. Tuntuni, who is caught by the soldiers and brought to the queens of the kingdom to be cooked, is able to fly away when the king’s seven queens pass him around among themselves. The king is given a frog to eat instead by the queens, and the indomitable Tuntuni sings once again: “*What fun, what fun, the king ate a frog!*” (108; emphasis in the original). Outraged that he has been made a fool of, the king orders that his queens’ noses be cut off and demands that Tuntuni be brought to him so that he can “swallow her whole” (109). The level of absurdity to which the king stoops is, once again, reflective of the paranoia with which the colonial enterprise often functioned—where the punishment often outweighed the crime.

After the soldiers are sent to catch the little bird, Tuntuni is captured and brought to the king who swallows her, she almost escapes after he belches her out, but the king, in an excessive display of might, sends two hundred soldiers after her. Once the king swallows Tuntuni again, he puts “both hands over his mouth” (109) so that she cannot escape. As with the sensation of unease and discomfort that accompanied the British subjugation of Bengal, the king begins to feel sick once the bird is trapped in his stomach. Ultimately, he is unable to keep her down without feeling very ill himself, and he has to literally heave her out of his system. The guards, trying to block Tuntuni’s escape by swinging their swords at her, cut off the king’s nose instead, and the king’s doctor has to “use all his medicines and bandages to save the king” (109). Tuntuni, on seeing the nose-less king, sings cheekily once again: “*The king has lost his nose and it serves him right!*” (111; emphasis in the original), and flies away to safety “beyond the borders of the kingdom” (111). The irreverent tone in Tuntuni’s songs also reflects a stance of defiance, courage, and resilience when confronted with oppression, the implications of which would not have been lost on Bengali children.

Two other characters that appear in *Tuntunir Boi* are also worth mentioning: a cat named Matanjali Sarkar, and the Stupid Tiger. Matanjali Sarkar (whose last name literally means government) is a bullying, tax-collecting cat who grows fat by intimidating a family of tigers, who represent Bengali peasantry, into believing that he is strong and mighty, when, in fact, he is cowardly. I read Matanjali Sarkar as the oppressive native intermediary figure and agent of British rule dating back to days of Lord Cornwallis’s land

revenue regulations. Cornwallis devised a system of collecting land revenue in 1793, referred to as the Permanent Settlement, which was in effect in Bengal through much of the nineteenth century, whereby the class of Indian *zamindars* (land owners) were given permanent ownership of land, and became both owners and rent collectors who paid a fixed amount of revenue directly to the British, largely by oppressing the peasants who rented the land from them. For the British, this system had direct advantages as they were not involved in the business of petty rent collecting, but had loyal Indian middlemen who functioned as the link between them and the peasants who tilled the land. It is important to note that many of these *zamindars* belonged to a newly moneyed class, who had become wealthy due to their business connections with the East India Company, and had gradually began replacing the old Mughal-era landed gentry who had closer ties with the peasantry. Further, the Permanent Settlement gave the *zamindar* sole ownership over the land, whereas the earlier system had given them only revenue collecting rights. The settlement implemented by Cornwallis, terribly burdensome to the peasant, led to a series of peasant rebellions, particularly in the second half of the nineteenth century, which have been the focus of Indian historiography in the last few decades, especially for subalternists like Ranajit Guha who have reiterated the significance of looking at '[Indian] history from below.'

Matanjali Sarkar is introduced as an undernourished fisherman's cat who envies the lifestyle of the well-fed milkman's cat. He cleverly arranges for the milkman's cat to be killed, and takes his place in the milkman's home. In the process, he morphs into a snob who is disdainfully dismissive of other cats, and gives himself a "grand new name" (*Magical World* 162) of Matanjali Sarkar. More significantly, he walks around with "a pen and a piece of paper" and, on seeing three tiger cubs playing together, says: "Pay up your taxes!" (162). He then proceeds to tell their mother that he is the "king's minister" and since they "live on the king's land . . . [they] have to pay taxes" (163). What follows can certainly be interpreted as a good account of how the Permanent Settlement actually worked. The tigress and her cubs hunt day and night to make sure that Matanjali Sarkar has plenty of food and they live in fear of being killed by him when, in reality, Matanjali Sarkar, a mere cat, lacks the strength to fight a tiger. He continues to display signs of his potency by pointing to animal carcasses lying about the jungle and claiming them as his victims. Ultimately, in this allegory of oppressive taxation, Matanjali Sarkar, who is, in reality, frightened by the noises the tigress and her cubs make while hunting for him, sees a hedgehog and hides under the root of a tree, where he is trampled by a stampeding elephant. The last encounter between the tigress and a dying Matanjali Sarkar, albeit humorous, also shows the cat's continuing efforts to maintain an illusion of power over his subjects. Matanjali Sarkar's stomach bursts open after being crushed by the elephant, and the tigress, expecting to see him with a huge kill, is surprised, instead, to find him in such a wounded state. She asks wonderingly: "What on earth has happened

to you?” and Matanjali Sarkar, attempting to sustain an illusion of invincibility even in death, replies: “You sent me such small animals to kill. I laughed so much that my tummy burst!” (167). The story of Matanjali Sarkar, therefore, ends on an ironic note as it “was the last thing he ever said” (167). Thus, in this archetypal folktale of the triumph of good over evil, the tigress and her cubs (who represent the oppressed peasantry) are freed from the impossible burdens imposed on them by Matanjali Sarkar, who displays what Benoy Chaudhuri has characterized as “high landlordism” (quoted in Bandyopadhyay 194), or the trait of imposing taxes without any regard to the peasant or the law. The figure of an autocratic native landlord or master is revisited in a number of U. Ray’s short stories, notably “Kenaram and Becharam,” a wish-fulfillment tale in which the servant, Kenaram (the one who is bought)—echoing the discontentment evidenced in the late nineteenth-century peasant rebellions in Bengal—is able to bring his master, Becharam (the one who sells), to justice for treating him poorly.

A motif that U. Ray uses repeatedly in *Tuntunir Boi* is that of a stupid and gullible tiger. The tiger—an animal once found abundantly in the jungles of Bengal—has been commonly evoked in Bengali folktales as a mighty and powerful beast. However, U. Ray deliberately reverses this representation of the tiger by emphasizing its imbecility, thereby deploying the tiger as a symbol of a greatly weakened and emasculated Bengal. In *The Stupid Tiger and other Tales*, William Radice’s translation of twenty stories from *Tuntunir Boi*, we find a number of tales such as “Uncle Tiger and his Nephew the Jackal,” “The Wicked Tiger,” “The Tiger and the Palanquin,” “The Stupid Tiger,” and “The Tiger-eating Jackal Cubs,” in which the tiger is fooled by the wily and cunning jackal. In “Uncle Tiger and his Nephew the Jackal,” for instance, the jackal is able to convince the tiger that a “thirty foot long crocodile on a mudbank, basking in the sun” is, in fact, a boat, which results in the injudicious tiger jumping on to the crocodile, who “immediately clamped him in its jaws and pulled him down into the water” (*Stupid Tiger* 18). In “The Wicked Tiger,” a tiger caged outside the king’s palace manages to get a kind-hearted Brahmin to let him out of his cage, and wants to eat him up. However, a clever jackal, called in as an arbitrator to decide if the tiger’s actions towards the Brahmin are justified, is able to trick the tiger back into his cage and lock him up by making him reenact the manner in which he was initially found by the Brahmin. “The Tiger and the Palanquin” is yet another instance of the tiger being tricked by the jackal into believing that a small wooden hut—a trap left by the farmers in a sugar cane field—is a palanquin that has been sent for them to attend a royal wedding as musicians. Of course, the tiger enters the hut unthinkingly, and is beaten to death the next morning by farmers who find him inside the contraption. In “The Stupid Tiger,” a jackal, tied up by angry goat herds for attempting to eat their goats, once again has the last laugh by getting a tiger to untie him, and leaving him to face the wrath of the irate villagers. Finally, in “The Tiger-eating Jackal Cubs,” a family of jackals seeks shelter in a tiger’s

hole, and is able to fend off the tiger by making him believe that the cubs are “dreadful monsters” (65) who would like to eat him for dinner. In all of these tales, thus, a wily and physically weaker jackal is repeatedly able to lead an unthinking tiger into absurd and, often, life-threatening situations. While this is in keeping with folktale patterns of the cunning defeating the brawny, it also insidiously sends a message to young readers that the tiger—the so-called king of the Bengali jungle—has neither the potency nor the power to withstand being fooled by opportunistic scavengers like the jackal.

Arguably, one of U. Ray's greatest contributions to Bengali children's literature was the publication of the children's magazine, *Sandesh*. Punning on the word *sandesh*—which can mean both a type of sweet and news in Bengali—the magazine was an eclectic collection of informative articles, short stories, games, puzzles, and fun facts for children. It was in *Sandesh* that U. Ray published several of his original stories, the best known of which is the fantastical tale, *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne*, immortalized in film a few decades later by his grandson Satyajit Ray.⁵ It tells the story of an exiled singer and drummer, two peasant boys with a passion for music, who are able to (with humor and magical assistance) foil the King of Shundi's wish to acquire the more benign kingdom of Halla. Although set in rural Bengal of folklore, it is evident that U. Ray covertly responds to some of the most pressing political issues of his day in this short story. The tale begins with two young village boys, Goopy, a singer, and Bagha, a drummer, being driven out of their respective villages because the prosaic villagers cannot bear to listen to their music anymore. They escape from the villagers, Bagha carrying his precious drum along, and, as fate would have it, meet inside the forest and begin to create music without fear of reprisals. The smothering atmosphere of the village—markedly inside the boundaries of a social structure that gags creative expression—is replaced by the more inclusive environment of the forest.

The forest is constructed as a liminal space where the past literally comes alive and nurtures these two young musicians. Here Goopy and Bagha meet “black, shadowy shapes” (*Magical World* 10) who turn out to be ghosts that are so deeply appreciative of the music produced by the young boys that they request them to play at their king's son's wedding. One can certainly attempt an allegorical reading of the ghosts as emblematic of an Indian spiritual-cultural heritage that was nurturing to the body, mind, and soul. At daybreak, when it is time to bid Goopy and Bagha farewell, the ghosts, who cannot withstand the light, ask them to make a few wishes. The musicians tellingly wish for people to be more appreciative of their music and for “enough to eat and decent clothes to wear” (11), in response to which the ghosts bestow on them the power to mesmerize their audiences, and present them with a magical bag and shoes that will grant them their material wishes. While the first wish clearly alludes to the desire for a society that does not police individual creativity and expression, the wish for food, I propose, highlights the inability of the colonial government to meet the basic demands of their subjects, especially during the

famines and epidemics that ravaged Bengal in 1890s. The wish for clothes can also be viewed in light of the *Swadeshi* movement, which called for the boycott of imported cloth, and supported the strengthening of an indigenous industry that manufactured its own yarn—a practice that, in the years to come, was popularized by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, who propagated the use of the *charkha* (spinning wheel) to produce homespun *khadi* (raw cotton) as a means of attaining economic self-reliance.

Eager to have an appreciative human audience, the young musicians initially go to the kingdom of Shundi, which mirrors a tyrannical colonial society in several ways—not only is it ruled by an autocratic king who has territorial ambitions and is willing to go to war with his neighbors, but the king also doles out unnecessarily severe punishments as evidenced by his attempt to kill the two harmless peasant boys. Using their magical shoes, Goopy and Bagha, however, escape the attempt to immolate them and arrive in the neighboring kingdom of Halla, which is ruled by a benevolent and caring king who appoints them as court musicians with a grand salary of five hundred rupees each. They settle down happily in Halla—a state which can be allegorically read as representing the munificence of self-rule—and where they receive the best kind of royal patronage. However, after a few months, their utopian existence is threatened by war as the king of Shundi, who has the mightier army, has imminent plans to attack Halla. The way in which the narrative unfolds from this point on can certainly be read as a response to the political milieu of early twentieth-century Bengal. To begin with, Goopy and Bagha recognize that Shundi's military might cannot be challenged by Halla by going to war, however, with a bit of magical assistance, can be destabilized by their own wit and ingenuity. Once again, U. Ray returns to his recurring message for Bengali children: that the strong—be it the British colonial state or the kingdom of Shundi—can always be outmaneuvered by the weak.

Interestingly, while extensive arrangements were being made in Shundi to prepare for war, the people of Shundi “were also offering prayers to the gods in the temple every day” (24). The extreme religiosity and piousness that lace this endeavor, I suggest, might also be read in the context of the *Swadeshi* movement's evocation of Hindu images that ultimately failed to convey a more secular message to the minority communities in Bengal. U. Ray, perhaps consciously, albeit humorously, uses this moment of collective worship by the Shundians to strike a blow to their war efforts. Goopy and Bagha devise a plan, whereby they use their magic bag to wish for “sweets of the most wonderful kind” (24), which they proceed to shower on the heads of the worshippers. The worshippers, who have never tasted such delicious sweets before, see it as a sign of divine benediction as they run to their king proclaiming: “the gods are so pleased with us that they have showered us with sweets which are delicious beyond description!” (25). The king hurries towards the temple only to find that his subjects have greedily eaten up all the heaven-sent sweets. Furious at his subjects, the king decides to return the next day to taste the exquisite

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