Plate 1: Modern popular painting. Detail.

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On Fairy Tales, Intellectuals and Nationalism in Bengal (1880-1920)

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NOTES ON TRANSLITERATION

The system of transliteration for Bengali words here adopted follows the guideline suggested by Suniti Kumar Chatterji (1890-1977) in 1926/27. Chatterji's method for Bengali spelling was based on the International Phonetic Association standard.

For few words of common use I have preferred the Anglo-Indian form: e.g. 'ayaha' instead of *āyā*, 'swadeshi' instead of *svadeśī*, 'swami' instead of *svāmī*.

For names of persons I have mostly adhered to the form chosen by the individuals themselves in Roman script: e.g. Rabindranath Tagore instead of *Rabīndranāth Ṭhākur*.

The kaleidoscopic richness of Bengal's folklore is recognized all over the world. That somehow implies its presence in today's global market like any other cultural commodity – whether we like it or not – and yet this development is relatively recent. In India herself the process of recognition and appreciation of Bengal's folklore had been long and controversial. Its scientific study began during the 1920s, though, by then, Dinesh Chandra Sen (1866-1939) had attempted to stress the importance of folk culture in the development of Bengali language and literature[1].

Over the nineteenth century the learned world and the folk world had remained mutually secluded[2]. The making of the Calcutta bhadralok's cultural unity, throughout that time, had been founded on the opposition to and rejection of the choṭalok's culture – the culture of the folk migrated from nearby or far off villages, who formed the mass of the city's lower orders[3]. The bhadralok's hostility against the folk culture adumbrated their contempt of Bengali peasantry[4].

A change of attitude took place in the early twentieth century through a

[1] D.C. Sen was an eminent historian of Bengali literature and language. He recognized the importance of the popular and oral element in his works: D.C. SEN 1896; D.C. SEN 1920; D.C. SEN 1923-1932; D.C. SEN 1925; D.C. SEN 1935; D.C. SEN 1939; D.C. SEN 1954.

[2] See S.N. MUKHERJEE 1970, reprinted in: S.N. MUKHERJEE 1977: 1-59; and Sumanta BANERJEE 1989.

[3] The word *choṭalok* literally means «low, or subordinate people». They were called also *choṭajāti* (low caste), though the name does not refer to any specific caste. They originally belonged to various migrant social groups, different in status, occupation and language.

[4] The Bengali Hindu *bhadralok*, or «gentle people», mostly belonging to high or respectable castes (Brahman, Baidya, Kayasth), have been widely studied by historians and sociologists of modern India. Different interpretations have singled out their role as: (i) a new social group, basically a by-product of the Permanent Settlement of 1793 and colonial economy; ii) a social stratum showing the traits of modern middle class; (iii) a learned and creative class experiencing the modernization/revival dialectic of colonial society; (iv) a powerful élite committed to nationalism in order to defend its privilege; (v) a rapidly decaying élite (just for that committed to nationalism); (vi) the class responsible for the making of Hindu communalism and ultimately for Bengal's partition in 1947. Among the several studies conveying different viewpoints: J.H. BROOMFIELD 1968; A. SEAL 1968: 39-57; S. SINHA and R. BHATTACHARYA 1969; J. GALLAGHER 1973; S.N. MUKHERJEE 1976; Sumit SARKAR 1977, then in Sumit SARKAR 1985: 58-70; H. BANNERJI 1989; J. CHATTERJI 1994. For a self-portrait of the twentieth century Calcutta's bhadralok it is worth reading a famous book by late Nirad C. Chaudhuri (1897-1998), N.C. CHAUDHURI 1989. For a short definition of the «*bhadralok* class», ibid.: 370.

new phase of nationalist politics. During and after the swadeshi movement (1903-1908), the Calcutta bhadralok-s had to convert their idiom in order to gain mass support. Such a reorientation implied a new consideration for Bengal's folk culture. Also the setup of Indian folkloric and anthropological studies took part in the process. It is no coincidence that the first teachings of sociology and social anthropology at the Calcutta University were introduced by Brajendra Nath Seal (1864-1938), an eminent swadeshi intellectual[5]. The bhadralok's reorientation had also short-term effects. In his classic work on the swadeshi movement, Sumit Sarkar has widely illustrated the use of folkloric themes as a means of propaganda[6]. The change, however, was possibly more apparent than real, as the nationalist bhadralok's attitude towards the Bengali peasantry showed a good deal of ambiguousness. Sumit Sarkar has stressed the class limitations of the swadeshi agrarian programme. Those limitations were largely inherited by the ideology of «Village Reconstruction». The episode of the Village Reconstruction Fund launched by Chittaranjan Das (1870-1925) can be considered marginal, nevertheless it reveals much of the Calcutta nationalist bhadralok's ambivalence towards the peasantry. By the end of 1922 nearly two and a half lakhs of rupees were collected to bring relief to peasants – Hindu and Muslim alike. In 1923, however, one and a half lakhs of the Fund were spent to buy the *Indian Daily News*, which was transformed into the *Forward*, the Calcutta daily committed to C.R. Das's Swarājya Party. In the following year, according to a Government of Bengal estimate, only Rs.2,000 of the Fund seem to have been destined to work in the villages[7].

To which extent and through which forms is the same ambiguousness reflected in Bengal's early anthropological literature? Which attitude did characterize in the main the Bengali intellectuals' relations with folk culture during the age of nationalist politics? Investigations on the tension between popular culture and the ideologies of nationalism and national state in India are not lacking: for instance, they have been substantial to the *Subaltern Studies* project. A number of studies on peasant insurgency in modern India have implied the critique of colonial anthropology[8]. Still the field seems to be open to new examinations. For instance, not many attempts have been made to underline the ideological slant of Bengali folklorists (professional and non professional alike) in establishing the objective of their research and their modus operandi.

[5] M.N. Srinivas - M.N. Panini 1986: 24-25.

[6] Sumit Sarkar 1973: 252-335.

[7] J. Gallagher 1973: 274.

[8] See *Peasant Struggles in India* 1979; Sumit Sarkar 1980; Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects...* 1983 and «The Prose of Counter-Insurgency»... 1983; Bernard S. Cohn 1985; Tanika Sarkar 1985.

This point is not devoid of interest for the historian, as Indian folk culture should be located within the broader framework of intellectual history[9] – in connection with the dynamics of conflict and change in India's colonial and post-colonial society.

These notes focus on Bengal's fairy and folk tales, their early collections and frame of reference. They tentatively try also to visualize the relations between intellectuals and folklore in late colonial Bengal, but they are far from being exhaustive in any respect. They simply gather some observations I put down, mostly from a comparative viewpoint, with the hope they may be of some use.

*

The word «folklore» was first proposed by William John Thoms (under the pseudonym Ambrose Merton) in a letter, dated 12 August 1846, to the London literary journal *Athenaeum*[10]. The term was soon to replace such labels as *antiquitates vulgares*, (popular antiquities), or «popular literature»[11]. A more specific designation was evidence of the coming-of-age of the studies on popular traditions.

The quick and terrific diffusion of the word «folklore» throughout Europe has been generally associated with the cultural constructions of European nationalisms. Finland and Germany, where the romantic idealization of peasantry and the rediscovery of popular traditions became part of the political idiom, constituted the best examples. Nevertheless, E.J. Hobsbawm has suggested that the role of cultural revival movements in political nationalism is not to be overestimated[12].

It was above all the romantic character of the German folkloric research which worked as an early pattern. Through the English medium, most of that romantic-bourgeois ideology reached the shores of Bengal. In the preface to his celebrated *Folk-Tales of Bengal*, Rev. Lal Behari Day (1824-1894) explained that the idea of collecting unwritten folk stories had been first suggested to him by Captain (afterwards Major) Richard Carnac Temple (1850-1931), son of Sir Richard Temple and an eminent folklorist himself[13]. Lal Behari's positive response had been admittedly dictated by his will to offer his «slight» contribution to the comparative studies of the time:

[9] K.N. Panikkar 1986; K.N. Panikkar 1987.

[10] Thoms 1846. Thoms's letter has been reproduced in: *The Study of Folklore* 1965: 4-6.

[11] «Folklore» replaced the word *Volkskunde* (popular knowledge), used in Germany as early as 1800.

[12] E.J. Hobsbawm 1992: 103-104.

[13] R.C. Temple collected a great number of Panjabi oral tales: R.C. Temple 1884-1900.

> As I was no stranger to the *Maehrchen* of the Brothers Grimm, to the *Norse Tales* so admirably told by Dasent, to Arnason's *Icelandic Stories* translated by Powell, to the *Highland Stories* done into English by Campbell, and to the fairy stories collected by other writers, and as I believed that the collection suggested would be a contribution, however slight, to that daily increasing literature of folklore and comparative mythology which, like comparative philosophy, proves that the swarthy and half-naked peasant on the banks of the Ganges is a cousin, albeit of the hundredth remove, to the fair-skinned and well-dressed Englishman on the banks of the Thames, I readily caught up the idea and cast about for materials[14].

The comparative method was somehow inherent in folkloric research. At that stage great emphasis was laid on the problem of the origins of folkloric themes and motifs, – an issue that nowadays few scholars would entertain with such a passionate involvement. The combine of monogetic and diffusionist theories had gained great favour and India was seen as the source of most Europe's medieval fairy tales and fables – a thesis mostly upheld by Dinesh Chandra Sen too[15]. – Some scholars maintained the existence of an archaic substratum for the origins of myths and fables: evolutionism, generally, saw folklore as the survival of preceding evolutionist stages[16]. Philological investigations, however, mainly pointed at India. There was ample historical evidence of the diffusion of *Pañcatantra* tales – from the lost translation into Pehlevi (A.D. 550-570), to the Syriac *Kalilag wa Dimnag* (A.D. 570) and Arabic *Kalilah wa Dimnah* (A.D. 750), onto the cycle of the «Fables of Bidpai» of medieval Europe, with the following learned version in Italian, *La Moral filosofia*, (1552) by Anton Francesco Doni (1513-1574), translated into English by the Elizabethan writer Sir Thomas North, *The Fables of Bidpai...* in 1570[17]. Nevertheless, even the early extra-Indian versions of the *Pañcatantra* are likely to be held more as adaptations than faithful translations[18]. In 1859 Theodor Benfey had set forth his theory of the Indian origins of all fairy tales[19]. Afterwards his views were to be ex-

[14] L.B. DAY 1883: I. The tales had been originally serialized for the *Bengal Magazine*, the journal edited by Lal Behari, from August 1875. Lal Bhehari's name is often written in different Romanized forms: Dey, or De. I have chosen the form which appears in the title-page of his book.

[15] D.C. SEN 1920: 1-51.

[16] This view was propagated by E.B. Tylor: E.B. TYLOR 1865; E.B. TYLOR 1871.

[17] Among the medieval books, we can mention the *Directorium humanae vitae* (1270) by Iohannes a Capua and the *Buch der Beispiele* (1483). A sort of revival of the stories of the brahmin Bidpai took place in XVII century France: *Livre de Lumières* 1644. Norman Mosley Penzer listed over 200 versions of the *Pañcatantra* in more than 50 languages: PENZER 1926: 207-242.

[18] C. RAJAN 1993: XXIII-XXV.

[19] TH. BENFEY 1859. Benfey's «Indian theory» on the origins of fairy-tales was generally associated with Max Mueller's studies on mythology. Incidentally two great modern writers of fairy stories and fantasy, C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, have questioned Max Mueller's theory on myth: H. CARPENTER 1997:

tensively revised[20], but Benfey's 'Indian theory' had provided a conceptual framework with which most nineteenth century collections of Indian fairy tales fitted in.

In terms of the culture industry of the time that conceptual framework should be reversed: it was the brothers Grimm's *Kinder-und Hausmaerchen* (1812-1815) which, rather, functioned as a model for Lal Behari's *Folk-tales of Bengal*. I will try to make this point clear.

D.C. Sen divided Bengali folk tales into four prevalent groups: (i) *rūpa kathā*, (ii) humorous tales, (iii) *vrata kathā* (tales interspersed with devotional hymns) and (iv) *gītā kathā* (tales interspersed with songs) – in his opinion the most important group[21]. According to this classification, most of Lal Behari's stories belonged to the type called *rūpa kathā* (the current Bengali name for «folk tale», or «fairy tale»), that is simple tales in which the super-human element (*Rākṣasa*, *Apsarasas*, etc.) predominates[22]. Some of them had parallels in other indian areas and traditions. Lal Behari claimed to have drawn his folk tales from a live oral tradition (a lady story-teller, an old Brahman, an old barber, an old servant, etc.). Vagueness apart, there is no reason to question their authenticity. In spite of that, the quality of Lal Behari's book underwent the same bourgeois transformation of the Grimms': from folkloric research to children's book.

By the latter half of the nineteenth century, children's books had become a consolidated genre along the lines of modern bourgeois taste. It was in many respects a new genre, as it was increasingly prompted by the publishing industry of the time. Since the 1740's England had pioneered the production of children's books, i.e. books specifically meant for children – obviously belonging to the upper classes – through such publishers as John Newbery (1713-1767), John and James Catnach, Ryle and Paul, etc.[23]. It is worth noting that the great literary fables of the 17th century, such as the *Pentamerone...* (Napoli, 1634-36), by Giambattista Basile (1575-1632) and *Histoires ou contes du temps passé, ou Contes de ma Mère l'Oye* (Paris, 1697), by Charles Perrault (1627-1703), were not originally meant for children. In spite of its title, *Lo trattenemiento de' peccerille* (the little ones' entertainment), the *Pentamerone*, as

41-45. Tolkien made an inversion of Max Mueller's idea that myth is «a disease of language»: he contended that rather languages are «a disease of mythology». See J.R.R. TOLKIEN 1964. Tolkien's essay «On Fairy-stories» was originally delivered as an Andrew Lang Lecture at the University of St.Andrews in 1938.

[20] J. HERTEL 1914; (The) *Pañcatantra Reconstructed* 1924.

[21] D.C. SEN 1920: 232-261.

[22] For an overview of super-human beings in the Indian tradition see J. VARENNE in: *Sources Orientales* VIII 1971: 257-293.

[23] On the history of children's literature in English: J.R. TOWNSEND 1990; F.J. HARVEY-DARTON 1982; G. AVERY 1989.

Benedetto Croce argued, was anything but a book for children. Perrault, who had collected his stories from oral and literary tradition, wrote his book to satisfy the new craze for the *contes de fées* in vogue at the royal court.

Most popular tales flowed into the childrens' book genre. This process affected also the Indian collections of fairy and folk tales since the publication of *Old Deccan Days* by Mary Frere[24]. This trend continued till the 1920s with books which had wide circulation[25].

An attempt to draw a border line between children's books and folkloric works was made by the Folk-Lore Society, established in London in 1878. In his *Handbook of Folk-lore*, G.L. Gomme, its first secretary, made clear that, while children could have been held as the natural receivers of fairy and folk tales, serious folklorists should engage themselves in compiling annotations, explanatory notes, indexes, bibliographies and critical studies[26]. The Folk-Lore Society guidelines turned out a number of good books in which the stories were generally followed by scholarly appendices. This new approach – sort of compromise between genre and scholarship – bore fruits also in the Indian collections[27]. Early examples were the collections edited by Maive Stokes and Flora Annie Steel[28]. It is worth noting the important role of Victorian ladies in India as compilers and editors of fairy tales. That was partly due to their easier contacts with Indian women and lady story-tellers. Mary Frere reproduced the stories narrated by her *ayaha*, Anna Liberata De Souza, a lady belonging to a family of converts from Goa of Lingayat origins[29]. Scholars had reason to complain of the *memsahibs'* moralistic bias. For instance, Alice Elizabeth Dracott stated that in Simla she had refused a reputed story-teller, one pahari villager, as she feared he would tell obscene tales. She mostly collected from women and discarded stories she would consider in 'bad taste'[30]. Such an attitude was not unusual among the amateur folklorists of the time.

[24] M. FRERE 1868. The first American edition was published in the same year (Philadelphia, Lippincott, 1868). Both were followed by a number of reprints. The book was soon translated into Danish by L.Moltke and into German by A. Passow: *Maerchen aus der Indischen Vergangenheit*, (Jena, n.d.).

[25] Great was the popularity of J. JACOBS 1892, Twenty-nine stories selected from various collections, including stories from the *Jātaka*, the *Pañcatantra* and the *Kathāsaritsāgara*. Jacobs edited also the *English Fairy Tales* (eighty-seven stories in two volumes) and the *Celtic Fairy Tales*. Generally speaking, the most popular collections of fairy tales for children in English were the twelve books of twelve colours published by Andrew Lang since 1889. The volume on India: LANG 1907.

[26] G.L. GOMME 1890.

[27] MAZHARUL Islam 1982: 47-54.

[28] M. STOKES 1880; F.A. STEEL and R.C. TEMPLE 1884.

[29] See de Souza's narrative in M. FRERE 1881: XXIII-XXXII. In the fifth impression (1898) it is said that Anna Liberata died on 14 August 1887 at the Government House, Gunish Khind, near Poona.

[30] A.E. DRACOTT 1906. On this episode: MAZHARUL Islam 1982: 78-79.

The second edition of F.A.Steel's collection, annotated by R.C. Temple, provided one of the most self-conscious and accomplished examples of the new balanced trend of folk tale books. In the authors' preface we read:

> The work has been apportioned between the authors in this way. Mrs. F.A.Steel is responsible for the text, and Major R.C.Temple for the annotations and appendices on Analysis and Survey of Incidents. The latter conforms strictly to the method adopted by the Folklore society and is intended to form part of their scheme of investigations into the general machinery of folk-tales.
>
> It is therefore hoped that the form of the book may fulfil the double intention with which it was written; namely, that the text should interest children, and at the same time the notes should render it valuable to those who study folklore on its scientific side[31].

In Bengal that balanced trend hardly took place until the publication of Rev. W. McCulloch's collection[32]. Before 1912 folk and fairy tale books did not go beyond the children's literature cliché', including the most celebrated collections of fairy tales in Bengali, the *Ṭhākurmār Jhuli* (The Grandmother's pouch) and *Ṭhākurdādār Jhuli* (The Grandfather's pouch) by Daksinaranjan Mitra Majumdar (1877-1957), published in 1907 and 1909 respectively. Although nearly unknown outside Bengal, these two books occupy a significant place in Bengal's modern culture. These fairy tales not only enjoyed – and still enjoy – a great popularity, they also aroused the interest of leading intellectuals, such as Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) and Dinesh Chandra Sen. Rabindranath Tagore wrote a foreword to the *Ṭhākurmār Jhuli*. He hailed it as «the greatest swadeshi item» of Bengal[33]. Daksinaranjan had tried to reproduce faithfully the stories of Eastern Bengal known as *gītā kathā*-s, as above mentioned tales interspersed with songs, usually narrated by poor old womenfolk who kept the oral transmission. He had spent about twenty-five years with his aunt, Rajalakshmi Chaudhurani (his father's sister), a widow who lived in the village of Dighapatia (Tangail Sub-division, District of Mymensingh, now in Bangladesh). There Daksinaranjan developed a keen interest in old tales and songs. Between 1896

[31] F.A. STEEL *with notes* by R.C. TEMPLE 1973: 3.

[32] W. MCCULLOCH 1912. The book presents twenty-eight tales with references to parallel stories in other collections. The author, however, did not provide any notice about his informants. Among the earlier publications of Bengal's fairy – and folk-tales in English, along with M. STOKES 1880 and L.B. DAY 1883, one has to remember G.H. Damant's pioneering work, DAMANT 1872-1880, R.S. MUKHARJI 1904, K.N. BANERJI 1905, S.B. BANERJEA 1910.

Collections of Santal folk-tales, such as C.H. BOMPAS 1909 and P.O. BODDING 1925-1929, are to be considered apart from mainstream Bengali folklore. Since their revolt against the moneylenders (Mahajan) in 1855, the Santals had been steadily studied and monitored by the English authorities.

[33] RABINDRANATH TAGORE 1992: 9.

and 1902 he had been collecting stories from old women, including apparently an aged Buddhist nun. He was among the first Indian folklorists who used a phonograph to record the story-tellers' voices. When in 1906 he came to Calcutta with his impressive materials, he was a young man with no university degree, but his erudition had struck Dinesh Chandra Sen and Swarnakumari Devi; it was no difficult for him to find a publisher[34]. Undoubtedly he was favoured by the swadeshi agitation in Bengal and its new emphasis on national culture and cultural roots. Though Daksinaranjan had tried his best to adhere to the original narration, he was not a trained ethnologist and made use of his literary skill to give a final shape to some tales. The first editions of *Ṭhākurmār Jhuli* and *Ṭhākurdādār Jhuli* still reflected the original diction of the story-tellers, but some of his friends, in particular Akshay Kumar Sarkar editor of *Sādhāraṇī*, requested him to expunge the archaic vocabulary, unintelligible for the general reader, in the following editions[35]. This occurence was highly regretted by D.C. Sen. Writing about the *Ṭhākurdādār Jhuli*, Sen did not deny the fact that the book could have not commanded its great popularity, if the archaic forms had not been changed in many places. Nevertheless, he lamented that the alterations had not been always happy:

> What words can convey the awful stillness of the night so powerfully as «নিশুম নিশুতি রাতি » <niguma niśuti rāti> ? The very word «*niguma*» which means «without sound» and «*niśuti*» which means «merged in profound slumber» recall to us by association the terrible calm of a midnight in a child's dream. Put any Sanskritic expressions in the place of these two Prakritic words, however pompous and grand they may be, they will fail to make a similar impression. But we, in whose ears still ring some of the powerful expressions of country-Prakrit associations of childhood, do understand and appreciate their rural charm and significance. Our younger generations accustomed to Sanskritic words have not learnt their meanings partly because they have lost touch with the old country-life, and partly because the present vocabularies scrupulously avoid illuminating scholars about Prakrit expressions, confining themselves to Sanskritic words[36].

Sen's list of the alterations «not always happy» in the collection is pretty long. His remarks are interesting also for reasons other than literary. The Sanskritization of the Bengali language throughout the nineteenth century was one of the chief means by which the bhadralok effected the cultural expropriation of the peasantry and the urban lower orders (choṭalok, or choṭajāti). The pro-

[34] Sankar Sen Gupta 1965: 111-117.
[35] Ibid.: 116.
[36] D.C. Sen 1920: 263-264.

cess enabled the bhadralok to draw a boundary between Bengali hegemonic culture (Sanskritization-cum-western culture) and Bengali subaltern cultures. However the bhadralok-s themselves could not perceive their culture as truly hegemonic, as political and economic power rested in the white masters' hands. Thus the bhadralok enterprise of reshaping Bengal's culture and language is to be ultimately situated in the conditions engendered by colonial society. This point has been widely illustrated by Sumanta Banerjee:

> The two main trends in Bengali culture prior to the advent of the British were represented first by a host of folk songs, rituals, poetry, verse-plays which had developed through social and occupational customs of the labouring classes as well as through popular religious beliefs; and secondly, by lyrics and songs of a classical nature composed in Sanskrit or highly Sanskritized Bengali, patronized by the royalty. [...]
>
> There was not yet any sharp distinction of high and low. [...] A schism in this cultural homogeneity began only from the middle of the nineteenth century when, with the spread of English education and western cultural ideas, a new generation of educated bhadraloks appeared on the scene. Determined to distinguish themselves from the lower orders, they sought to exclude the traditional folk culture and their later urban variations from the common heritage[37].

Banerjee has argued that the mode itself of expression of the bhadralok culture (their literature and paintings) assumed the defensive character of a private world insulated from the stream of life in the streets[38].

> The language itself, instead of becoming a mode of free and easy communication among all segments of society, was turned into an agent of excommunication shaped in such a way as to deny the lower orders any access to it[39].

Young Bengali intellectuals experienced various difficulties in departing from the *sādhubhāṣā*, the conventional and highly Sanskritized bookish Bengali of the nineteenth century[40]. In 1877 Syamarachan Ganguli made interesting observations about the role the colonial administration had had in fostering that sort of artificial language[41].

It was but natural for a refined philologist like D.C. Sen to criticize the al-

[37] S. BANERJEE 1989: 78, 83.

[38] The bhadralok's quest for rationality in philosophy was a sort of defence against the «obscure forces» which haunted village life: G. FLORA 1993: 6-7.

[39] S. BANERJEE 1989: 205.

[40] Ibid.: 182-183.

[41] S. GANGULI 1877: 395-417. Quoted in S. BANERJEE 1989: 205, n.7.

terations in Daksinaranjan's collections on aesthetic grounds: as a loss of authentic flavour and a surrender to conventions. The episode is interesting as it reveals the subordination of the Bengali folkloric research of the time to the bhadralok cultural slant and culture-industry.

D.C. Sen highly praised Daksinaranjan's work as a «yeoman's service to the cause of Bengali literature», of higher importance compared with that of other Bengali folklorists, such as Harinath Majumdar, Lal Behari Day and Fakir Ram Kavibhusana[42]. He wrote about Lal Behari that the most beautiful folk stories of Bengal...

> [...] were not accessible to him, as, being a Christian, he could not have full command of the resources of the Hindu home[43].

D.C. Sen was firmly convinced that Daksinaranjan's collections were faithful documents of the folk life in ancient Bengal. One tale in particular, the story of Mālañcamālā from the *Ṭhākurdādār Jhuli*, seemed to him a sort of living picture:

> «[...] the old Bengali life of the 10th century is vividly before us»[44].

He reproduced the story[45] with a commentary[46].

In his analysis D.C. Sen divides the tale into two levels. On the first level Mālañcamālā, the heroine whose name means the «garland of the garden», symbolizes all the virtues of Indian womanhood, whose ideals were still alive in India, Sen argued, even though unintelligible to the outsider. On the second level, the story seems to suggest a marked Tantrik-Buddhist influence. Mālañcamālā displays an absolute indifference to her body and the pains to which it may be subjected; in heroic devotion to the Truth she undergoes martyrdom. She overcomes the trial at the cremation ground and defeats the goblins and the evil spirits: a trial traditionally associated with the attainment of *Siddhi* (achievement of supranormal faculties) in Tantrism. Her actions are replete with Buddhist renounciation and when, finally, after a long series of painful events, Truth is about to triumph, she will delay her return to the king's palace, where she might expect her ultimate transformation into a goddess. As though following the Mahāyāna precepts, Sen suggested, she refrains from tasting any

[42] D.C. Sen 1920: 261-262, 265-266.
[43] D.C. Sen 1954: 643.
[44] D.C. Sen 1920: 265.
[45] Ibid.: 267-322.
[46] Ibid.: 323-344.

joy herself, until and unless the sorrows and wrongs of all the people with whom she came in contact are remedied.

D.C. Sen believed that some stories collected by D.R. Mitra Majumdar could have been originally composed in the Pala age. He based his assumption on the assimilation of Buddhist and Hindu elements filtered through the popular narrative[47]. In Mālañcamālā, he argued, the absence of the agency of gods as well as of the formal elements of Paurāṇic faith tells of an old age not yet complicated by Brahmanic rituals and caste observance.

From the time of the Pala kings, protectors of Buddhism, Mymensingh and other eastern districts had become virtually independent under the rule of the local chiefs of Prāgjyotiṣpur (Assam). The following wars between the Hindu Sena kings and these tribes (Hajang, Chakma, Rajbangshi, and others generally known as Kirāt-s) provided also the historical background to the conflict between caste-Hinduism and local cults of goddesses and gods, such as Manasā Devī (the snake goddess), Ādya (also known as Gaurī and Caṇḍī), Dakṣiṇā Ray, Dharma Ṭhākur and others that ultimately flowed into the Śaiva-Śakti mainstream. D.C. Sen maintained that most of such cults, particularly that of Dharma Ṭhākur in western Bengal, had been essentially Buddhist[48]. He suggested that many Buddhist religious books in Bengal had been so recast and transformed by the Hindu priests that in modern times they commonly pass for Hindu religious poems[49]. Following investigations, however, have pointed out that the Dharma Ṭhākur cult, the Sahajiyā cult and others from fringe Bengal were essentially aboriginal and could not necessarily claim ancestry from the Buddhist tradition[50]. Shahshibusan Das Gupta described the Dharma Ṭhākur cult as a mixture of:

> [...] some relics of decaying Buddhism, popular Hindu ideas and practices, a large number of indigenous beliefs and ceremonies and ingredients derived also from Islam[51].

D.C. Sen and many other Bengali intellectuals believed in the 'Buddhist theory' to explain Bengal's cultural specificity within the Indian context. The idea that the folk Dharma Pūjā prevalent in Western Bengal was a form of Bud-

[47] D.C. Sen 1954: 657.

[48] Ibid.: 30-43. On the Sahajiyā cult, Ibid.: 43-50. On Bengali supposedly Buddhist poetry, songs and ballads, Ibid.: 51-75.

[49] Ibid.: 31.

[50] Niharranjan Ray 1994: 393 and fol. It gives a brief description of the Dharma dance involving a corpse and a human skull.

[51] S. Das Gupta 1969: 259.

dhism was first suggested by M.M. Haraprasad Sastri at a meeting of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1894[52]. Since then, and for a good number of years, it became nearly customary for progressive Bengali intellectuals to associate the popular/tribal element with relics of Buddhism[53].

It has been noticed that, after the advent of Islam, in the corpus of Bengali literature connected to aboriginal cults the local cosmogonies soon expanded in order to introduce new super-human beings brought by foreign Muslims[54]. The tensions between caste-Hindus, on the one hand, and tribal/outcaste-communities on the other had been likely a factor in the latter's ready acceptance of Islam at least in some syncretistic form[55]. Incidentally, this was M.N. Roy's major thesis to explain the massive phenomenon of conversion to 'revolutionary' Islam in medieval Bengal[56].

D.C. Sen attached great importance to Daksinaranjan's collections for various reasons, but two reasons in particular seem more significant. First, by the time of the publication of the *Ṭhākurmār Jhuli* and *Ṭhākurdādār Jhuli* Bengali folk literature (especially from Mymensingh and the eastern districts) had not yet received adequate attention in the Indian universities. It was in 1913-14 that D.C. Sen noticed some passages quoted from an old ballad in the journal *Saurabh*, published at Mymensingh. Then he came into contact with a poor man, Chandrakumar De (1881-1946), who, he said, possessed some poetic talents without any pretension to scholarship. D.C. Sen helped him in getting a job as a collector of rural ballads for the Calcutta University. Shortly D.C. Sen set up a project that took shape thanks to Asutosh Mookerjee (1864-1924), then the Calcutta University Vice-Chancellor. Other people joined Chandrakumar De in his work of collecting, namely Ashutosh Chaudhuri, Beharilal Chakravarty and a few others[57]. That project led to the edition of the *Mymensigh Gītikā* [Ballads of Mymensingh], eight volumes in royal octavo (including

[52] The text appeared in *Proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal for December 1894.* It was followed by another communication, in which H.P. Sastri attempted a comparison between the *Śrī Dharma-maṅgala*, the sacred book of Dharma worshippers, and the Mahāyāna book of Buddha's life, *Lalitāvistāra*: H.P. Sastri 1895. See A. Bhattacharyya 1977: 8-56.

[53] A glance through the first twenty volumes of the *Modern Review* would highlight this point. The 'Buddhist Theory' has attracted also Samaren Roy, radical humanist and former secretary of M.N. Roy: S. Roy 1981. See In particular «Buddhism in Bengal», based on an article under the same title by H.P. Sastri in *Udbodhan*, (*Ashar*, 1324 B.S. - June-July 1917), Ibid.: 36-43.

[54] R.M. Eaton 1993: 270 and fol. See also Asim Roy 1983.

[55] For instance, Das Gupta refers that, as the followers of Dharma Ṭhākur had suffered much from the caste-Hindus, when the Mahomedans entered Bengal, they took shelter under them. S.DAS Gupta 1969: 265.

[56] M.N. Roy 1958.

[57] D.C. Sen 1954: 652-653. For Chandrakumar De's bio-bibliographical notes see Sankar Sen Gupta 1965: 161-176. See also the notes on Kedarnath Majumdar (1870-1926) another Mymensingh folklorist and editor of the magazine *Saurabh*, ibid.: 152-162.

the English translation) published by the Calcutta University and sponsored by the Government of Bengal[58]. That project foreran also the establishment of the Department of Indian Vernaculars at the Calcutta University in 1919, with wich a number of local folklorists were to associate[59].

Before 1913, hence, there were few specimens of that delicate and rustic simplicity which pleased D.C. Sen's literary and philological taste[60]. When he came across D.R. Mitra Majumdar's materials, he was struck by the Prakrit narrative form, that confirmed his views on the sober elegance of Bengali popular literature before the advent of Brahmanism and Islam. He stressed, at times, that Muslim Bengali folks had preserved in certain synchretistic songs some features of that early simplicity. That was the case with the Muslims of Rajshahi, who had the monopoly of *Bhāsān Gān*, or songs of Manasā Devī, or those in Chittagong[61]. To underline the fact that the highly moral character of Behula in the songs of the Manasā cult was likely first conceived in the Buddhistic Pala age and afterwards embellished by the more refined poets of the Brahmanical renaissance of Bengal, he equated Behula to Kanchanmala, another heroine from Daksinaranjan's *Ṭhākurdādār Jhuli*. In his opinion, both bore the stamp of a remote Buddhist period[62].

The second reason for D.C. Sen's enthusiastic interest in D.R. Mitra Majumdar's collections lay in a general assumption brought out by the dominant positivist outlook of the late nineteenth century. Folk tales, fables, ballads, etc. were seen as the repositories of popular mind and psychology from the days of old. This psychological perception mingled with the romantic bourgeois taste, which had long established an aesthetic hyerarchy of folkloric documents. We have interesting examples from the literary history of Europe.

In France Positivism lay the philosophical foundations of Naturalism in literature. Among the trends of literary realism which followed the publication of the novels of Emile Zola (1840-1902), the Italian *Verismo* of the 1880s was one of the most original developments. There were at least three major aspects that distinguished Italian *Verismo* from French Naturalism: i) the deepening through the literary work of the peculiar solutions given to the relationship between ideal and real by the political *Risorgimento* (the process of Italy's unifica-

[58] *Mymensingh Gītikā* 1923-1932.

[59] Few months before his resignment from the post of Vice-Chancellor for his open opposition to the government, Asutosh Mookerjee recalled with pride the birth of the department as one of the Calcutta University's major achievements: «Convocation Adress Delivered on March 18, 1922, at the Calcutta University», in: S. SINHA 1970: 58-80, particularly 68-70.

[60] There had been a contribution by George A. Grierson: GRIERSON 1878.

[61] D.C. SEN 1954: 674-683.

[62] D.C. SEN 1925: 56-57. D.C. Sen reproduced the story of Behula and Manasā Devī for the *Modern Review* and afterwards in D.C. SEN 1954: 233-249.

tion and national-bourgeois revolution); ii) the prevalence of themes relating to the land and rural life over the city – explained by Italy's then inadequate industrial development; and, consequently, iii) a certain attention to folkloric themes in order to define the peasants' psychology and ideology. The last aspect was crucial to the work of two leading representatives of literary *Verismo*, Giovanni Verga (1840-1922) and Luigi Capuana (1839-1915). Both were from Sicily, a southern region whose agrarian conditions were still semi-feudal, and both for some time settled down in Milan, the most advanced city in northern Italy and a major link with the European culture of the time. Verga undertook a serious study of the Sicilian folklore for the works which were to form his «ciclo dei vinti» [the cycle of the vanquished]: *Vita dei Campi* (1880) and *I Malavoglia* (1881)[63]. His folkloric interests are widely documented in his correspondence with Capuana, from which, however, it is apparent that aesthetic canons were the guideline of his research. For *I Malavoglia*, a novel centred on the vicissitudes of a poor family of fishermen, he needed to construct a 'new language'. To this end he made extensive use of proverbs, as proverbs correspond to «stylistic and ideological forms, or models», which, in their alleged fixity, claim to condense the popular world vision[64]. An important collection of Sicilian proverbs, edited by the ethnologist Giuseppe Pitrè, had been published in 1879, but Verga made a limited use of it. He was after an older collection by abbot Santo Rapisarda, *Raccolta di proverbi siciliani ridotti in canzoni* (Catania, 1824), just because those proverbs were written in the form of songs (*canzoni*)[65]. Again, Verga received with scant interest an original, but raw document (a transcript of the self-defence of an illiterate woman) that Capuana had sent to him. Whereas he expressed words of great admiration for Capuana's Sicilian fables (1882), in which he saw the «documents» of the islanders' nature and popular fantasy:

> Your book of fables has completely reconciled myself to you. [...] *I hope you had changed not even a single word from our women's narration.* Now, it seems to me that the study aimed at collecting and presenting the popular songs should be addressed towards the examination of this primitive and uncorrupted form of popular imagination, in which – I venture to say – the ethnographic character of peoples themselves has left such a large and authentic imprint. *De fil en aiguille*, as

[63] The works of Verga were soon translated into French. The English reader became familiar with them only in the 1920s thanks to the translations by David Herbert Lawrence (1885-1930). A selection of tales from *Vita dei Campi* has been published recently: G. VERGA 1996.

[64] A.M. CIRESE 1976: 14-15, 131-132. Cirese has stressed the relevance of «ideological-stylistic» analyses, rather than «stylistic-psychological», for the study of proverbs.

[65] The episode is evinced from the letters of Verga to Capuana, dated Catania 10 and 20 April 1879. G. VERGA 1940: 121. Quoted in A.M. CIRESE 1976: 7-8.

> the French would say, it seems to me we can deduce how the theory of natural character may be proved real by these primitive documents of the Sicilian nature[66].

Incidentally, the fables of Capuana were a counterfeit, pastiche at best[67], but this is hardly important. What matters is that literary taste and style generally remained the first and foremost writers' preoccupation even when dealing with folklore. Naturally also publishers and editors worried about style and, above all, about readers. The case of Akshaychandra K. Sarkar is quite revealing. The editor of D.R. Majumdar Mitra's collections could have had in mind as a model W.B.Yeats's *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (1888) and *Irish Fairy Tales* (1892), which, after all, had not been written in Gaelic[68]. A glance through the proceedings of the *Bańgīya Sāhitya Pariṣat* (the Bengali Literary Council established at Calcutta in 1894) and its *Patrikā* (journal) would likely convince us that its original ends did not differ much from those of the National Literary Society, established at Dublin in 1892.

Like many European intellectuals, D.C. Sen maintained that fairy and folk tales reflected the peoples' intimate character and nature. In his opinion the stories collected by D.R. Mitra Majumdar bore witness to the uniqueness of Bengali folk culture. He cautiously conceded that some of the old Bengali fables «with changes of names of persons and places» had «found a circulation all over the world»...

> [...] but the 'Malanchamala' type did not obtain such publicity as these stories are peculiarly Bengali and contain those subtle aesthetic appeals and emotional characteristics to which people outside our province may not react favourably.
>
> The peculiar charm of this ballad literature lies in the fact that the

[66] Verga's letter to Capuana, dated Milano, 24 September 1882. G. VERGA 1940: 249-250. Quoted in A.M. CIRESE 1976: 10-11. My italics.

[67] G. COCCHIARA 1966: 302-311. Quoted in A.M. CIRESE 1976: 11.

[68] Irish folklore was crucial to W.B.Yeats's poetics. See M.H. THUENTE 1980. Yeats's collections were mostly based on earlier published sources. This, of course, does not mean that his studies were not serious. Yeats was in touch with Douglas Hyde and other major Irish folklorists; he was of great aid to Lady Gregory and afterwards to Y.Evans-Wentz (incidentally a well-known translator of the Buddhist Canon) for his work, *The Fairy Faith in Celtic Countries* (1911). K. RAINE 1977: VIII. Nevertheless Yeats's researches were not meant for drawing a historical, or anthropological, profile. In Benedict Kiely's words:

«In getting together these early anthologies of folklore and legend he was seeking his symbols and himself [...] He was seeking not for the meaning of any mystery but for what he had already determined to find: a revelation of character, that 'of race and that of soul'; a poetic and passionate gesture; a world of the imagination [...]» B. KIELY 1983: X.

characters are generally impelled by ardent passions not restricted by Brahminic rules[69].

D.C. Sen was a man of magnificent erudition, but his understanding of fairy tales was much conditioned by the nineteenth century culture, obsessed, as it were, with the problem of origins. It was the Finnish school which brought about an important change of perspective in the field with Aarne's system of empirical classification of fairy tales[70]. In 1928 Vladimir Jakovlevic Propp (1895-1970), who criticized the empirical approach, made a further step by focusing his investigations on the question «What is a fairy tale?»[71] Propp's method advanced the thesis of a structural homogeny of all the fairy tales – a definite departure from the quest for specificity and originality. As a whole, however, most Indian intellectuals had been only limitedly aware of such new trends in folklore till the eve of world war II. The American folklorists, who followed the project of the Finnish school, had deepened the general distinction between 'motif', a narrative element related to a concrete pattern of action, and 'theme', a conceptual mode involving a finite sequence of actions, ideas, beliefs and feelings. The evolution of the original empirical system had given rise to the current standards of classification[72]. Although such standards are in use since the 1960's, earlier plans for the classification and analysis of tales had been adopted by various folklore societies. Pioneering works stressed how crucial the analysis of motifs was to the study of folklore[73]. Be it noticed that the term 'motif' is exchangeable with 'incident' used in older studies and there was no accordance among scholars about its real meaning: Propp, for instance, employed the word *sjuzet* (subject, plot). There was, instead, a general agreement about the importance of single narrative elements for the study of fairy and folk tales. In the field of Indology, the Austrian born Maurice Bloomfield (1855-1928) undertook the analysis of popular narrative elements in Sanskrit literature. For instance, he investigated the related motifs of talking birds and prodigious birds,

[69] D.C. SEN 1954: 657-658.

[70] A. AARNE 1910.

[71] V. JA. PROPP 1928. This fundamental work, unlike his other famous essay on wondertales (PROPP 1946), had a late circulation in western languages. PROPP 1966; PROPP 1968. For a critical approach to Propp's life and work: PROPP 1984.

[72] A. AARNE and S. THOMPSON 1973. S. THOMPSON 1955-1958. These two reference works are different as the former regards the classification of stories, or prevailing themes, whereas the latter regards the classification of motifs and it is, therefore, more analytical. Special reference works for Indian folk tales are: L. BODKER 1957; S. THOMPSON and J. BALYS 1958. S. THOMPSON and W. ROBERTS 1960. These works are still widely used as classification standards. See *Folktales of India* 1987: 332-352.

[73] For instance, J. BOLTE and G. POLIVKA 1913-1932.

including those of the golden bird and the search for the golden bird (Aarne-Thompson 550) which appear also in some stories collected by Mitra Majumdar[74].

D.C. Sen too was aware of the importance of the analysis of narrative elements for the study of Bengal's folk literature, nevertheless his chief object was to situate it within the historicism of his great canvas of Bengali language and literature. As above mentioned, his first point was that most Bengali early folk tales differed from the Paurāṇic stories which were to replace them. *Purāṇa*-s, he argued, emphasized *Bhakti* (devotion) as a more powerful agent of salvation than the development of man's moral qualities. Such heroines as Sītā and Sāvitrī embodied those Paurāṇic ideals. In the ancient folk tales references to the great Sanskrit epics and *Bhakti* cults' elements were wanting, whereas the 'ethical laws' which formed the basis of human virtues seemed to be basically Buddhist. Thus he dated them back to a period at least anterior to the thirteenth century[75]. His second point was that:

> After the Muhammedan conquest of Bengal, Islam found easy converts among the lay Buddhist population which was still very considerable in the country[76].

Those converts had preserved older forms of faith through the centuries. Such forms were visible in their songs and spells, plenty of appeals to gods and goddesses, and above all in the transmission of folk and fairy tales by their elderly women, who could be either family or village story-tellers. In his classification D.C. Sen divided the Muslim folk-tales of Bengal into three main classes: i) Those related to *pīr*-s, or saints, generally worshipped also by Hindu folks in some syncretistic cults, such as Mānik Pīr and Satya Pīr. ii) Those related to heroic deeds in connection with the advent of Islam, often derived from Persian and Arabic sources and datable after the 11th century. iii) Those preserved from a remote time after having expunged all direct references to Hindu and Buddhist beliefs. Sen mentioned a fourth class of tales, namely the adventures of the heroes and prophets of Arabia and Persia written in vernacular Bengal[77]. He was particularly

[74] M. BLOOMFIELD 1914. See appendix II. D.C. Sen too analysed the central motif of talking and prophetic birds in his comparison of Grimms' «Faithful John» with the Bengali story of «Fakirchand» (in Lal Behari Day's collection), known also as the story of Princess Rupamala. D.C. SEN 1920: 8-14.

[75] D.C. SEN 1920: 54-56.

[76] Ibid.: 81.

[77] Ibid.: 98-99.

interested in the third class of tales, as, he argued, they were evidence of old Bengali oral and literary themes[78].

D.C. Sen's third and most significant point related to the importance of folkloric research for the rediscovery of the original Bengali folk tales. As above mentioned, he insisted on the special role Daksinaranjan Mitra Majumdar had in the Bengali folk revival[79]. To that effect, he compared Daksinaranjan's version of the story of Sakhi-sona, entitled *Puṣpamālā*, – which had had an islamized version by Muhammad Korvan Ali from the Dacca District – with the classic version of Fakir Rama Kavibhusana, Bengali poet of the 16th century[80]. Kavibhusana had introduced classical elements in the story; when, at the beginning, Candana proposes to the princess to leave the palace and go with him to another country where they would live as husband and wife, his arguments are all drawn from Paurāṇic examples. The characters' dialogues are redundant with Paurāṇic quotations. Situations are rendered according to the canons of the poetic art of the time, replete with repetitions and stereotypes. In contrast with Kavibhusana's sophistry, Sen argued, Daksinaranjan's version is remarkable for its simplicity and genuineness:

> But when we come to the version of Dakshinaranjan what a sense of relief do we feel! This scholar has taken down the story as told by old women of the country-side. He has added nothing himself. He has even tried, as far as possible, to retain the very language in which these tales were delivered. This takes us back to a state of things which existed in the country before the Muhammadan invasion. [...] We find in these country-tales some of the simple charms of old life, before the Brahmin priests had made it a complicated and artificial one[81].

D.C. Sen stressed also that Daksinaranjan had preserved the traditional Hindu features of the story through the characters' simple feelings of love and devotion, whereas the Muslim version had shown a «deterioration of the Hindu ideal of chastity.» In Muhammad Korvan Ali's version, when Sakhisona and Kumara meet in the school:

> [...] he seduces her in the language of a low class debauch. [...] and they meet

[78] D.C. Sen gives a short list of Muslim folk-tales belonging to this class; ibid.: 156. Curiously enough, here, like in other passages, he does not provide complete references; he mentions the author, the publisher and the publisher's address: e.g., «...the story of Kānchana mālā by Mahammad Munshi...published by Maniruddin Ahmad from No. 337, Upper Chitpore Road, Calcutta».

[79] It has to be remembered that Sen's *Folk Literature of Bengal*, although published in 1920, was thoroughly based on his Fellowship lectures delivered at the Calcutta University in 1917. In that year there were still great hopes about Daksinaranjan's further researches.

[80] Ibid.: 195-232.

[81] Ibid.: 225.

> shamelessly in a room of the palace every night. What a contrast does such a scene of lust, introduced by a Muhammadan writer, offer to that quiet self-control which we find in the original Hindu story! Pre-nuptial love is unknown in our community but sometimes it finds a place in our folk-tales, as it does in the present case. It is, however, couched in guarded language showing a high sense of sexual purity even amongst our rustic folk[82].

D.C. Sen's judgment seems to parallel the moralistic attitude of so many Victorian ladies and clergymen who would deal with Indian folklore. In this regard, the anthropologist Verrier Elwin observed:

> It is remarkable that the collection of folktales should have been regarded in India as a suitable pastime for the clergy and for the English ladies[83]

In D.C. Sen's words we find also an echo of the widespread bhadralok bias against the alleged oversexed nature of the Bengali Muslims:

> If we take up the Muhammadan version for a critical review, we see, as we have already observed, that with the loss of Hindu ideal of womanly virtue amongst the rank and file of converts to Islam, immodestly in sexual matters was no longer thought of as a matter of serious social condemnation. The Muhammadans revel in unrestrained language while dealing with the topics of the passion of the flesh[84].

All in all, folklore is to be considered crucial to the historicism inherent in D.C. Sen's vision of the development of Bengali language and literature[85]. This aspect is very important. It is worth remembering how most indologists had been extremely cautious in dealing with Indian folklore, when coming to the point of the originality of folk conceptions and works. They mostly believed that fairy and folk tales would preserve certain features of myth, but, in terms of literary creation, they were merely orally transmitted adaptations from some Sanskrit original. Max Mueller, who like all the German philologists of his gen-

[82] Ibid.: 221.

[83] H.V.H. ELWIN 1944: XV. Quoted in MAZHARUL Islam 1982: 173. In India folkloric sexual motifs had been considered «objectionable» and in «bad taste» for long. Verrier Elwin contributed to a reorientation in the field with his sketch and analysis of twenty-four tales on the «vagina dentata» motif (Thompson, A1313.3.1; F547.1.1): ELWIN 1942.

[84] D.C. SEN 1920: 220.

[85] D.C. Sen, Mahasweta Sengupta argues, developed a «flexible and inclusive» vision of Bengali literature, without questioning the 'literary' worth of folk and pre-modern Bengali texts. This is the main difference between him and Sukumar Sen, author of another classic history of Bengali literature: Sukumar SEN 1970. See M. SENGUPTA 1995: 56-69.

eration was greatly indebted towards Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, received with favour the publication of Mary Frere's book. His enthusiasm was likely the highest, as he came upon the Sanskrit original of one of the stories collected. He told Mary Frere that, after the lapse of many centuries, its version, as recorded from her ayaha's narration, «read like a direct translation from the native Sanskrit»[86].

The question of the originality of Indian folk tales and their borrowing from classical literature was systematically treated by the American scholar William Norman Brown. Through his first extensive survey of Indian folk literature, Brown came to the conclusion that most current oral tales had originated in some old literary model:

> Folklorists would often give us to understand that oral and literary fictions have separate traditions after a story has once been received into literature from the folklore; that is, that oral tales have had an independent and continuous existence from the time of their birth in the distant past. They do, of course, make some exceptions to this rule in a few isolated cases where the reverse is so obvious as to be undeniable. Now, whether or not this opinion is justified in other countries, it is not substantiated in India. It is doubtless true that in the remote past many stories had their origin among the illiterate folk, often in pre-literary times, and were later taken into literature. It is also just as true that many stories that appear in literature existed there first and are not indebted to the folklore for their origin. But leaving aside questions concerning the early history of Hindu stories and dealing strictly with *modern* Indian fiction, we find that folklore has frequently taken its material from literature. This process has been so extensive that of the 3,000 tales so far reported, all of which have been collected during the past fifty years, at least half can be shown to be derived from literary sources[87].

Brown focused on the high number of *Pañcatantra* stories represented in Indian folklore. His article reproduced in a condensed form the arguments of his doctoral dissertation «The *Pañcatantra* in Modern Indian Folklore», submitted to the Johns Hopkins University. It strongly reflected the teachings of Maurice Bloomfield. As above mentioned, Bloomfield had pioneered the motif-indexing of Indian fiction from the strict viewpoint of indology. He set up the unaccomplished encyclopaedic project to survey a great number of motifs by establishing parallels between literary and oral traditions. Among the papers Bloomfield dedicated to this effort a good example is his study of the tale of the

[86] M. Frere 1881: XI.

[87] W.N. Brown 1919. Reprinted in: W.N. Brown 1978: 123-148, cfr. 124.

crow and the palm tree[88]. A crow perches on a palm tree, which is about to fall, and in the eyes of the world it seems its weight has made the tree fall down. This widespread motif, in its various versions, symbolizes the unexepected success someone may achieve by mere accident. Apparently it is reflected in many Indian proverbs and maxims about pure chance. Also the modern Bengali proverb «*Jhaṛe bagā paṛe, Fakirer kerāmoti baṛe*» [The crane falls in the storm, (and) the fakir's power increases] relates to this motif[89]. In Bloomfield's opinion, the story with all its variants derived from an aphorism of the *Nyāya* school. Incidentally other scholars, namely Helmuth von Glasenapp and Wendy Doniger, have dealt with the crow and the palm tree as a metaphor for chance and coincidence. Wendy Doniger has suggested that a negative version of this motif: «A crow alighted on a palmyra tree and at the same moment some of the fruit fell on its head and killed it» – it is likely older than the optimistic one conveyed by the folk gloss[90].

Following Bloomfield's track, Brown situated his treatment of folk motifs within a definite historical and cultural perspective. For instance, dealing with the motif of escaping one's fate, he first sketched the different attitude before fate of Muslims and Hindus – an interesting comparison between the ideas of *kismat* (fate) and *karma*[91].

In dealing with Indian folklore, most indianists of the time, including Bloomfield's American school, used to express the same opinions held by the European idealistic currents of literary criticism about folk tales and popular poetry in general. Benedetto Croce (1866-1952) had suggested that whatever went by 'popular art or literature', it reproduced, in reality, some original older learned form. Such views by no means implied that those scholars despised folklore. Quite the reverse, W.N.Brown's contributions to the study of Indian folk tales proved to be substantial to the development of the discipline. In his first article of 1919 he provided the first extensive bibliography of the Indian folk tale-collections in English[92]. He edited the Jaina story of the prince Kalaka[93] and, moreover, he collected a good number of unpublished Indian tales in his manuscripts. This collection was used by Stith Thompson, Jonas Balys and Warren E. Roberts in preparing their works of classification and indexing of Indian oral tales.

[88] M. Bloomfield 1919.

[89] Quoted in Mazharul Islam 1982: 190.

[90] W. Doniger O'Flaherty 1984: 265-268. The maxim was collected by G.A. Jacob in his *Popular Maxims...* (1900), p.11, citing the *Kāśikāvṛtti* on Panini 5.3.106. W. Doniger O'Flaherty 1984: 265, n. 18.

[91] W.N. Brown 1920. W.N. Brown 1978: 153.

[92] W.N. Brown 1978: 143-148.

[93] W.N. Brown 1933.

As it is well-known, Benedetto Croce himself was a lover of popular Neapolitan poetry and legends. He was the first editor and translator into modern Italian of G.B. Basile's *Pentamerone,* or *Cunto de li cunti, overo lo trattenemiento de' peccerille.* Curiously enough, a selection from this book had been translated into German (by Liebrecht in 1846) and English (by Taylor in 1847); a complete English translation by Sir Richard Burton had been published in 1893, but no complete Italian edition appeared before 1925[94].

In his introduction to the *Pentamerone*, Croce makes clear his views on folk tales and folklore. Basile's work is an example of *Kunstmaerchen*, literary fables (like those of Hans Christian Andersen), and just for this Croce considered it «the greatest book of Italian Baroque». Croce praised Basile's linguistic inventions as the genuine expression of his genius. The process of transformation of folk tales into art, he argued, was made possible by the writer's artistic 'subjectivity'.

> This permeative subjectivity was the necessary condition to transform the substance of those fables into artistic matter. As they are usually narrated by the people, they lose – if they ever had it – their original poetic life, the afflatus that he who first imagined and composed one or another had given to them. Thus, they look like those dim (*scialbi*) and contrived summaries by which one sketches the 'fact' out of a tale or a novel. Hence the ordinary insipidity of the fables shorthand taken down by folklorists and demopsychologists: rather documents of dialects, customs and, as it were, myths, but very rarely works of poetry. In fact, those collections never become readable books, unless they are more or less revised, or reshaped by artistic sensibility[95].

It is apparent that the 1920s idealistic criticism considered folklore almost exclusively in its relation to the *belles-lettres*. Now, the question of the aesthetic dimension of fairy tales is not a secondary one[96]; and yet we look at fairy tales not merely as objects of aesthetic enjoyment, but also as deposits of the human imagination. The idealistic criticism, with its contempt of sociology and things related, entirely missed the point of the complex relations of fables with the anthropological vision: how those tales would express, at different levels, intricacies of life, danger, as well as survival strategies. On the other hand, the Continental sociology of the 1920s, far from taking a participant stand on folklore, mostly maintained a «negative» view about it, or merely engaged in a classifica-

[94] G.B. Basile 1847. G.B. Basile 1893. G.B. Basile 1974. As early as 1892 Croce wrote an important critical study on Basile for the *Biblioteca Napoletana di Storia e Letteratura*, afterwards revised: B. Croce 1948: 1-118.

[95] B. Croce in G.B. Basile 1974: vol. I, XXXV.

[96] See M. Luethi 1984.

tory approach. Against any over simplification of the matter, Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), in his *Prison Notebooks*, stressed the importance to study folklore as:

> [...] a «conception of the world and life», widely implicit in determinate social strata (determined in space and time), as opposed (again in ways which are mostly implicit, mechanical, objective) to «official» conceptions of the world (or, in a broader sense, to the learned strata of society historically determined) which followed one upon the other in the course of history. (Hence the close relation between folklore and «common sense», that is philosophical folklore)[97].

Gramsci called on a more serious study of folklore, as in the 1920s the intellectuals' attitude towards it seemed to him still characterized by a search for «the picturesque»[98]. The situation in 1920s India was by no means better. In March 1921 the first number of *Man in India*, edited by Sarat Chandra Roy, was issued at Ranchi. The quarterly, which soon proved to be a breakthrough, contained an elaboration of S.C. Roy's presidential address to the anthropological section of the eighth annual meeting of the *Indian Science Congress* (February 1921). S.C. Roy lamented that almost all that had been hitherto accomplished in the field of anthropological research in India had been the work of European investigators. Throughout the nineteenth century Indians had given a negligible contribution to the study of ethnology and folklore and they still kept on neglecting the field.

> Since 1883, although we have a slightly better account to give of ourselves, Indian writers on anthropological subjects still remain in a hopeless minority. Thus, out of about two hundred and fifteen articles and short notes on Ethnography and Folklore that appeared in the Proceedings, Journals and Memoirs of the Asiatic Society of Bengal from 1884 to 1920, not more than sixty-five were contributed by Indians. Similarly, out of about seventy-six anthropological articles in the Calcutta Review from 1884 to 1920, only thirty were from the pens of Indian writers, and Indians are responsible for no more than one-hundred and thirty-two out of a total

[97] A. GRAMSCI 1975: vol. III, 2311. The quotation is from the notebook 27 (XI) of 1935, «Osservazioni sul 'Folclore'». This text presents in a revised form the notes Gramsci took down about G. CROCIONI 1928 in the notebook 1 (XVI), 1929-1930, A. GRAMSCI 1975: vol. I, 89-90. Many Italian scholars have stressed the important changes Gramsci introduced in his note of 1935. In 1929 Gramsci apparently had considered folklore as a somewhat passive «conception of the world» of the subaltern classes. In 1935 he related it to the dynamic element of the «opposition» to the «official» conceptions of the world, i.e. the hegemonic culture of the dominant classes historically determined.

[98] Gramsci made clear he did not mean to deny the importance of great scholarly contributions, and yet those contributions seemed to him essentially focused on the methodology for collecting and classifying folk materials. A. GRAMSCI 1975: vol. III, 2311.

of about four hundred and seventy-seven articles on anthropological subjects that appeared in the Indian Antiquary from 1884 to 1920[99].

The causes of the paucity of Indian workers in ethnology and folklore, according to S.C. Roy, mainly lay in the indifferent attitude of Indian universities towards such investigations. He ultimately blamed the government of India and the provincial governments for the state of affairs, as they had undertaken their ethnographic surveys for the needs of the practical administrator, but did little or nothing to encourage independent scientific research[100].

That remark was correct and yet it is difficult not to envisage the traits of a certain contempt of folklore in the apathy of the Indian intellectuals of the time. Contempt of folklore basically meant 'bourgeois' contempt of the peasants and their world. In Bengal, as above mentioned, the rise of the bhadralok cultural hegemony in the nineteenth century was in good part founded on the exclusion of the folk culture. The enthusiasm of some personalities, such as D.C. Sen, the scientist Ramendra Sundar Trivedi (1864-1919)[101], or Rabindranath Tagore cannot obscure the fact that the majority of Calcutta intellectuals were, so to say, lukewarm about folklore. Folk art, for instance, was certainly popular in Calcutta thanks to the wide circulation of *paṭa*-s (folk paintings, narrative scrolls), Kalighat paintings, Bat-tala prints, etc., but it was not even considered a 'true art' – not until the emergence of a new generation of modern painters in the first two decades of the twentieth century. An exception was possibly made for the fables, as far as they flowed into the stream of juvenile literature. As we have seen, the Bengali literary society assimilated D.R. Mitra Majumdar's collections into the children's book genre. Nowadays, in Bengal nearly everybody remembers Mitra Majumdar as one of the greatest Bengali writers of children's books. This perception is to some extent justified by the fact that after 1927 Mitra Majumdar's production essentially focused on juvenile books[102]. Though, it does not render justice to his early work as a folklorist[103].

The years running from the 1890s to the 1920s were the golden age of

[99] S.C. Roy 1921: 11-55, cfr. 15.

[100] Ibid.: 48-51.

[101] R.S. Trivedi, lecturer in physics and chemistry, member of the Calcutta University Senate, was one of the founders of the Baṅgīyā Sāhitya Pariṣat, or Bengali Literary Council, established in 1894.

[102] Mitra-Majumdar's interest in juvenile literature was keen even earlier. In 1908 he was the chief editor of *Sarathi*, and in 1912 he published *Charu o Haru*. For a bibliographical note on his works see Sankar Sen Gupta 1965: 124-125.

[103] Interestingly enough, E.C. Kirkland 1966 listed D.R. Mitra-Majumdar's two collections without any annotation and with a wrong date of their first edition. Mazharul Islam 1982 does not even mention Mitra-Majumdar's name.

Bengali children's literature. Whether an imitation of the fortunate English genre or not, Bengali children's books remained unparalleled in the Indian context. Also in this field the Tagore family had a significant part. In 1895 the Ādi Brāhma Samāj started a series of books for children; the first title was *Śakuntalā*, retold by the painter Abanindranath Tagore (1871-1951), son of Gunendranath (1847-1881) and cousin of Rabindranath[104]. The second title was Rabindranath's long poem *Nadī* and the third Abanindranath's *Kṣīrer Putul*[105]. Abanindranath's books for children inaugurated a new season of book illustrations. In 1883 Macmillan had published Lal Behari Day's *Folk-Tales of Bengal* without illustrations; in 1912 a new edition appeared with illustrations in colour by Warwick Globe[106]. Again, in 1913 Macmillan's first edition of Rabindranath Tagore's children's poems, *The Crescent Moon*, was replete with colour pictures conveying a new artistic sense of 'Indianness'[107]. With a book like *Myths of the Hindus and the Buddhists,* compiled by the art historian, A.K. Coomaraswamy, and Vivekananda's disciple, Sister Nivedita (Margaret E. Noble), the interaction between text and illustrations became crucial[108]. As it has been rightly observed, the artists' visualization of scenes from the *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Mahābhārata* and the *Jātaka*-s formed «an integral part of the book's retelling of the stories»[109]. This trend paralleled the art of book illustration in Europe. In those very years, such great childrens' book illustrators as Arthur Rackham (1867-1939), Edmond Dulac (1882-1953) and Kay Nielsen (1886-1957) adorned beautiful expensive editions and 'coffee-table' volumes with mounted colour plates. No illustrated book of Indian subject reached such a sophisticated excellence, although the book of Bengali fairy tales written by Francis B. Bradley-Birt and illustrated by Abanindranath Tagore almost did it[110].

[104] Abanindranath was the grandson of Girindranath Tagore (1820-1854), brother of Rabindranath's father, Debendranath (1817-1905). Thus he was Rabindranath's second cousin, but, according to the Bengali family customs, he called the poet uncle.

[105] Abanindranath TAGORE, *Śakuntalā*... 1899; Abanindranath TAGORE, *Kṣīrer Putul*... 1899. Apparently it was Rabindranath who persuaded Abanindra to write for children. See Alokendranath TAGORE 1989: 13.

[106] L.B. DAY 1912.

[107] On the relations between Abanindranath Tagore's new style of painting and the early twentieth century Bengali book illustrations: Tapati GUHA-THAKURTA 1992: 281-284. On the relations between Bengal's modern school of painting and nationalism see also: R. CHATTOPADHYAY 1987; G. FLORA 1989.

[108] NIVEDITA and A.K. COOMARASWAMY 1913. The artists were Abanindranath, Nandalal Bose (1882-1966), Kshitindranth Majumdar (1891-1975), Surendranath Kar (1891-1970), Asit Haldar (1890-1964) and K.Venkatappa (1887-1965). The book has been translated into several languages. It has had several reprints, though latest editions have cheap black and white reproductions.

[109] T. GUHA-THAKURTA 1992: 281.

[110] F.B. BRADLEY-BIRT 1920. Bradley-Birt, a civil servant, was the author of a book on Chota Nagpur, F.B. BRADLEY-BIRT 1903, and the editor of a well-known selection of the poems of Derozio, H.L.V. DEROZIO 1923.

The most significant graphic innovations took place in the realm of children's literature, which included rewriting of fairy tales. Ramananda Chatterjee (1865-1943), publisher and editor of the two magazines, *Prabāsī* (Emigrant) and *Modern Review*, which represented the major trends of modernism in Bengal's culture, entered the field with two illustrated books[111]. The highest number of illustrations to these books was provided by Upendrakishore Ray Chowdhury (U.Ray), original writer and painter and pioneer colour print-maker. He wrote and illustrated a popular collection of tales, followed by his daughter, Sukhalata Rao, who compiled and rewrote fairy tales for children[112]. In 1913 Upendrakishore's firm, U.Ray & Sons, launched the children's magazine *Sandeś*[113]. This periodical proved to be a landmark in modern Bengali, thanks also to the literary experiments of Upendrakishore's son, Sukumar Ray, who had founded the 'Nonsense Club' in his house at 22 Sukea Street, Calcutta. Sukumar produced for *Sandeś* his finest drawings and nonsense verse, afterwards collected in a volume[114]. After a lapse of many years, *Sandeś* was revived in 1961 by Sukumar and his son, the great film-maker Satyajit Ray (1922-1992). In the 1960s Satyajit created popular characters for the magazine, such as the detective Feluda and Dr. Sanku, translated and read all over the world.

While philologists cared for Prakrit tunes and Buddhist interpretations, the general reader found it natural to assimilate *rūpa-kathā* with children's books. More so as that had been the dominant verdict of taste in the west since the time of the brothers Grimm's works. But taste is not neutral: it reflects, as Pierre Bourdieu has put it, a continuous series of 'fractions', partly derived from the socio-economic sphere and partly derived from the opposition production/consumption («found at the level of distributional properties» and «homologous to that found at the level of stylistic characteristics») of the aesthetic object and its related values (including lifestyles, political ideas, etc.)[115]. The first set of 'fractions' reminds the opposition underlined by Gramsci between folklore as «a conception of the world» and the «official» conceptions, i.e. the hegemonic culture, through the ages.

Before going on, I want to make clear that I do not mean to belittle the importance of children's literature. I am aware of the unique position enjoyed in

[111] KṚTTIVĀS 1909-10. It was an expurgated edition of a popular Bat-tala text, a Bengali version of *Rāmāyaṇa*. It was advertised as meant for «respectable family reading», cfr. T.GUHA-THAKURTA 1992: 282. *Hindusthānī Upakathā* 1911-12.

[112] U. RAY CHOWDHURY 1909-10. Sukhalata RAO 1915-16. Upendrakishore's tales have been translated into English: W. RADICE 1981.

[113] The word *Sandeś* means «information», «message», «news», and would suit a serious paper. But it is also the name of a popular Bengali sweet.

[114] S. RAY 1923.

[115] P. BOURDIEU 1979; P. BOURDIEU 1984.

English literature, say, by Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, or *Through the Looking Glass*. I do consider Collodi's *Le avventure di Pinocchio* one of the most important Italian books ever written. My point is that there is no necessary and exclusive link between fairy tales and children. It is a general assumption to equate fairy tales to children's literature. Perhaps, over these latter years this common sense has been reinforced by the popularity of a book written by the psychoanalist Bruno Bettelheim (1903-1990). Bettelheim indicates his book's relatively restricted purpose: «that of suggesting why fairy tales are so meaningful to children in helping them cope with the psychological problems of growing up and integrating their personalities»[116]. Fairy tales, he argues, «state an existential dilemma briefly and pointedly» – thus permitting the child to deal with the problem in its most essential form. Unlike most modern children's literature, they show «real life is not all sunny», and this makes their use invaluable in mastering the psychological problems of growing up. But nowhere he says that fairy tales' universe of meaning is limited to childhood's experience. Interestingly enough he states that:

> Applying the psychoanalytic model of the human personality, fairy tales carry important messages to the conscious, the preconscious and the unconscious mind, on whatever level each is functioning at the time[117].

The meaning of fairy tales is crucial to existential problems at any stage of human life. This is powerfully proved by the constant reference to, or reinterpretation and use of magic stories motifs in contemporary literature[118].

The view that no necessary and exclusive link between fairy tales and children should be postulated had been firstly advanced by a connoisseur like J.R.R.Tolkien. Tolkien believed that fairy stories were primarily the stage where human dramas were performed – thus the definition of a fairy story should not depend on any definition of elf or fairy, but upon the nature of *Faërie*: the Perilous Realm:

> Stories that are actually concerned primarily with 'fairies', that is with creatures that might also in modern English be called 'elves' are relatively

[116] B. BETTELHEIM 1991: 14.

[117] Ibid.: 6.

[118] Rereading and retelling of fairy tales had been crucial to the works of Angela Carter (1940-1992). In particular A. CARTER 1974 and A. CARTER 1979. Most enjoyable her interpretation of Cinderella from a gender perspective: A. CARTER 1993: 110-120. Fairy tales play a part also in the works of such writers as Salman Rushdie, Antonia S. Byatt and Marina Warner.

> rare, and as a rule not very interesting. Most good 'fairy-stories' are about the *adventures* of men in the Perilous Realm or upon its shadowy marches[119].

Tolkien's essay was originally composed as an Andrew Lang Lecture in 1938. Andrew Lang (1844-1912), Scottish scholar, writer and folklorist, was famous for his dispute about Max Mueller's solar theory of myth[120]. He is also remembered as the editor of the popular twelve books of twelve colours of «fairy-tales for children». Tolkien remarked Lang's sentimental attitude towards the past and children. Above all, he criticized the commonplace about the special relation of children with fairy tales:

> Among those who still have enough wisdom not to think fairy-stories pernicious, the common opinion seems to be that there is a natural connexion between the minds of children and fairy-stories of the same order as the connexion between children's bodies and milk. I think this is an error; [...] Actually, the association of children and fairy-stories is an accident of our domestic history. Fairy-stories have in the modern lettered world been relegated to the 'nursery', as shabby or old fashioned furniture is relegated in the play-room, primarily because the adults do not want it, and do not mind if it is misused. It is not the choice of the children which decides this. [...] They are young and growing, and normally have keen appetites, so the fairy-stories as a rule go down well enough. But in fact only some children, and some adults, have any special taste for them; and when they have it, it is not exclusive, nor even necessarily dominant. It is a taste, too, that would not appear, I think, very early in childhood without artificial stimulus; it is certainly one that does not decrease but increase with age, if it is innate[121].

It has to be said that the prevailing views on the connection children/fairy tales seem to reflect a more general attitude of the modern bourgeois mind. Before the idealistic criticism advanced the thesis of the derivative character of popular literature, there had been a wide consensus around the idea that oral tales were fruit of a primitive, or *childlike* human imagination. Victorian England's anthropology had established a unilinear course of evolution through the stages of savagery, barbarism and civilization. Edward B. Tylor illustrated the order of the so-called racial progress: from the Australian to the Aztec, on to the Chinese, the Italian and, finally, the (Victorian) Anglo-Saxon, the most accomplished product of human evolution[122]. Such assumptions were closely con-

[119] J.R.R. Tolkien 1964: 16.
[120] F.M. Mueller 1869: II, 1-142; A. Lang 1898.
[121] J.R.R. Tolkien 1964: 34-35.
[122] Tylor 1871.

nected with the English colonial enterprise[123]. The connection fables/children, in reality, implied the broader equations folklore=primitiveness=childhood. It was suggestive of a sociological as well as political stand, as to equate folklore with childhood implied to relegate the peasants in a state of permanent minority in terms of political rights[124].

In those years, another folk genre which gained the favour of the Bengali bhadralok intellectuals was the *chele-bholāna chaṛā* (nursery rhymes). Again, it was perhaps due to the influence of the English culture, as collections of English nursery rhymes had no parallel for richness in any other language[125]. An important contribution came from Rabindranath Tagore, who, as early as 1895, wrote an essay (including a selection of *chaṛā*-s) on Bengali nursery rhymes, afterwards collected in one volume significantly entitled *Loka-sāhitya* (Folk literarure)[126]. Another famous collection of Bengali nursery rhymes, edited by Jogindranath Sarkar, was published in 1900 with a foreword by Ramendra Sundar Trivedi[127]. Trivedi expressed a common opinion in the literary society of the time, as he contended that folk literature, which had survived in oral recitations, presented, unadultarated through the ages, the spirit of Bengali people: a spirit of freshness and *naiveté*.

Rabindranath Tagore, like R.S. Trivedi, was not a folklorist; his approach to *chele-bholāna chaṛā*, *grāmya chaṛā* and popular poetry in general was the poet's one. Dealing with nursery rhymes, he was primarily moved by the intimate images of his own infancy:

> *'Bṛṣṭi paṛe ṭāpur-ṭupur, nadī ela bān'* – this rhyme was to my mind a

[123] The white colonists' contempt of the Australian Aborigines had led to the ethnic cleansing of Tasmania. The long lasting policy of expropriation of Aborigines' rights had been lying at the core of Australia's history till very recent times and its effects are still visible.

[124] For instance, the liberal German sociologist Ferdinand Toennies equated the *volk* (people) to women and children, as the sphere of its social relations, he argued, mainly turns round family, neighbourhood and friendship. TOENNIES 1887; TOENNIES 1955.

[125] Interestingly enough, also the richness of the English collections of nursery rhymes (and the related folkloric research) was linked to the culture industry of the time. Popular books like the *Infant Institutes* (1797) and *Songs for the Nursery* (1805) had had a wide circulation; but it was only after the publication of the collections edited by James Orchard Halliwell (HALLIWELL 1842; HALLIWELL 1849), with their several reprints, that the genre literally boomed.

[126] Tagore's essay, «Chelebhūlana Chaṛā», originally appeared as a long article in two parts in the *Baṅgīya Sāhitya Pariṣat Patrikā*, vol. I (1895). In the same year and journal appeared «Kavi Samgit» and lastly, in 1899, «Grāmyasāhitya» (Village literature), Bhāratī, Phalgun 1305 B.S. (Feb.-Mar. 1899). These articles were collected in R. TAGORE 1907. Now in R. TAGORE 1976: VI, 575-664.

[127] J.N. SARKAR 1900. This book has had several reprints in variously abridged editions for children.

sort of magical spell in my boyhood and I still remember how I was overwhelmed by ecstasy[128].

In his memoirs Tagore recollected the dreaming atmosphere which surrounded his childhood. The stories the maidservants used to narrate left a deep imprint in his fertile imagination. Interestingly enough, while in his first autobiography, *Jīvansmṛti* (1912), Rabindranath, who was left to the care of servants after his mother's death, stressed the oppressive climate of his house and spoke humorously of the servants' regime as an unhappy 'slave dynasty', in *Chelebelā*, which appeared nearly simultaneously in English as *My Boyhood Days* (1940), he lingered on the atmosphere of enchantment of the Jorasanko house. The stories he used to hear from his servants contributed to that feeling of magic:

> There was a narrow passage, enclosed by latticed walls, leading from the outer apartments to the interior of the house. A dimly burning lantern swung from the ceiling. As I went along this passage, my mind would be haunted by the idea that something was creeping upon me from behind. Little shivers ran up and down my back. In those days devils and spirits lurked in the recesses of every man's mind, and the air was full of ghost stories[129]

All in all Tagore's taste was not 'popular'. His was the conviction that the folk mind was unable to elevate to literary forms subtler than ballads and lullabies. Moreover he advocated the right for the litterateur to amend the rustic rhymes by expunging and replacing their indecent words[130]. What made Tagore feel so deeply and sincerely attracted by the folk poetry was its peculiar solidity: a poetical world where the simple form served to express day-to-day realism as well as unconventional devotion. He freely borrowed popular lyrics in his compositions, particularly the songs of the Bāul-s, Āul-s and Fakir-s, wandering minstrels whose religious views – Hindu and Muslim alike – did not conform with any sort of orthodoxy. The connection of Tagore's poetry with the Bāul-s'

[128] «It rains, tap-tap, the river has flooded». R.Tagore, «Loka-sāhitya», in: *Rabīndra Racanāvalī*, vol. VI... cfr. p. 578.

[129] R. TAGORE 1940: 149. This text was published as a book in December 1940. Rabindranath called his autobiographical writing 'memory pictures'. It has been observed that in his two memoirs he «tended to substitute emotional truth for facts»: K. DUTTA-A. ROBINSON 1995: 43-45. Biographies of Tagore do not tell much about the maidservants at Jorasanko. This is a regrettable circumstance, as maids used to be storytellers in the Bengali families of the time. Apparently, a number of literate *jāti-vaiṣṇava* women served as tutors in bhadralok families, including the Tagore family, «...and some such women copied manuscripts, as evidenced by the holdings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal»: J.T. O'CONNEL 1982: 190.

[130] R. TAGORE 1976: VI, 600.

songs is well-known. As early as 1883 he wrote his first essay on them[131], and in the early swadeshi days he used Bāul tunes to write patriotic songs, including the famous *Āmār sonār Bāṅglā*.

Perhaps no other intellectual did more than Rabindranath Tagore to preserve Bengali folklore and to encourage its study. Certainly the prestige of his Nobel prize enabled him to make Bengal's folk art known worldwide. Yet opinions on Tagore's relation with Bengal's folk culture are by no means unanimous. Just like Vivekananda's exploit at Chicago, in the long run Tagore's Nobel prize became a motive of pride for the Hindu bhadralok-s, a factor crucial to their self-image as a cultured community[132]. The association of the poet with middle class values as well as his cumbersome literary legacy fuelled the radical criticism of his works over these latter decades, particularly among leftist Bengali writers and historians. It was above all during the 1970s that Tagore became a target for the critique of the bhadralok-zamindari mind. In a long article for the *New Left Review*, Premen Addy and Ibne Azad criticized Tagore's social ideas (e.g. «Tagore sought solace in the dream of Eastern spirituality...»). They saw him mainly as a product of landlordism:

> The family tree of Rabindranath Tagore, Bengal's world renowned poet, illustrates how the blossoms of *bhadralok* literary genius were firmly rooted in collaboration, graft and landlordism which brought the Hindu elites to the top in the wake of British conquest[133].

And as a typical member of the bhadralok class, whose weakness lay in their:

> [...] thoroughly contradictory position half-way between the colonial power above and the popular masses below[134].

Formerly there had been more successfull attempts to integrate Tagore

[131] R. TAGORE 1883. Bāul-s were definitely popularized in the west through Tagore's lectures. See R. TAGORE 1931.

[132] After the initial rejection by his countrymen for his 'heretical' views, Tagore became a 'fetish' for the Bengali bhadralok-s, in Nirad Chaudhuri's words, he became «... the holy mascot of Bengali provincial vanity»: N.C. CHAUDHURI 1987: 596, quoted in: W. RADICE 1994: 26. Boasting about Tagore's achievements is still current in Bengal. In the summer 1995 the writer and columnist Khushwant Singh declared he found Tagore's poetry rather dull, or something like that. This elicited a storm in West Bengal, where the Left Front led State Assembly passed a resolution against him. Kushwant Singh received a number of death threats and finally, on August 3 1995, perhaps for the first time in its history the whole Rajya Sabha took an unanimous decision condemning the Delhi based aged journalist «for having called Rabindranath Tagore a bad writer»: TIMES of India 1995: 7.

[133] P. ADDY-I. AZAD 1973: 86.

[134] Ibid.: 94-95.

within a progressive reading of Bengali culture[135], but the question of Tagore's relation with folklore somehow remained in the shade[136].

In the conclusion to his essay on élite and popular culture in nineteenth century Calcutta, Sumanta Banerjee has remarked on Tagore:

> Tagore experimented with folk tunes among other styles in his songs. But while these songs, based on the melodic forms of 'Baul', 'Bhatiali' and 'Sari' songs, are popular in Bengali middle class homes, they are hardly sung by the peasants of the Bengal countryside among whom the roving Baul or the boatman's songs still remain popular. [...] Being a sensitive soul, he was honest enough to recognize his limitations in this direction. In one of his poems composed towards the end of his life, he regretted: 'My poems, I know, though they have traversed diverse roads, have not reached everywhere'[137].

In Banerjee's opinion Tagore, particularly in the 1930s, reflected the dilemma of the modern 'socially conscious Bengali intellectual', whose style of communication was far removed from that of the masses and suffered, therefore, from the very dichotomy that had afflicted his nineteenth century predecessors[138]. This observation is correct, though I would take few exceptions. As Tagore's lyric style was firmly rooted in the individual's experience seen as a prism for reality, it is perhaps pointless to remark that his prose lacked the «vividness of the colloquial Bengali as spoken by the man in the street». It would make no sense to speak about defective experiments with realism either – whatever meaning this word may convey in Indian literature[139]. Whereas the quality that Sumanta Banerjee and others have recognized in Tagore – that of being an intellectual socially (and linguistically) conscious – developed quite early. We have to go back to the 1890s, when the poet was posted by his father, Debendranath, as a resident landlord in the family estates at Shelidah, Sajadpur and Potisar (now all in Bangladesh) and Kuthibari. The mixed feelings Rabindranath experienced far from Calcutta were emotionally sustained by the rising tide of his imagination. It was then that he came in contact with Bāul

[135] Susobhan Sarkar's progressive interpretation of the Bengali Renaissance ended with Rabindranath Tagore. In his notes, written in the 1940s, the Marxist scholar stressed how in Tagore humanism had been always stronger than mysticism: Susobhan SARKAR 1970: 1-74; 136-147; 148-183.

[136] One cannot fail to notice that in *A Centenary Volume* 1961 there is not even one single contribution on Tagore's interests in folklore. In that period two articles appeared on this subject: Sankar SEN GUPTA 1959; and ZBAVITEL 1961.

[137] S. BANERJEE 1989: 206. Quotation from R.Tagore's poem, «Aikatan» [Harmony], 18 January 1941.

[138] S. BANERJEE 1989: 206-207.

[139] For an assessment of realism in modern Indian literature: Meenakshi MUKHERJEE 1994. See, in particular, the notes on Saratchandra Chatterjee and the modern Bengali novel, Ibid.: 101-124.

singers – such personalities as Lalan Fakir, Gagan Harkar and other folk poets and story-tellers. It was then that he undertook the study of popular poetry and folklore. Most of his entire production of *choṭa galpa* (short stories) belongs to that period[140]. Whether these tales can be held as homologous to the parallel trends of literary realism in Europe or not, certainly at least some of them were permeated with a village atmosphere, where a gallery of folk characters struck a sharp contrast with the city and its lifestyles. To write his short stories and work out a compromise between his inclinations to lyricism and the realism inherent in the folks' life, Tagore had to 'reinvent' a language. That language seemed artificial – an accusation launched by his friend Ramananda Chatterjee[141]. Later in his life Tagore felt the need to defend himself from that accusation:

> You speak about my language, and say that even in my prose I am a poet. But if my language sometimes goes beyond what is appropriate in a story, you can't blame me for that, for I had to create my Bengali prose myself. My language was not there, heaped-up and ready-made... I had to create the prose of my stories as I went along. You often speak of Maupassant and other foreign writers: their language was already made for them. If they had had to create their language as they wrote, I wonder how they would have fared[142].

In the course of time, Bengali intellectuals have been trying to justify Tagore's resort to an 'artificial literary language' in the impersonal narrative of his short stories. Why had he to use it? Nirmal Kumar Sidhanta wondered about; and here is his somewhat naive reply:

> To answer this we have to go back to the problem which faced Dante when he attempted to write poetry in a modern language, the language of common speech. The language has numerous dialects and the poet does not know which one of these to choose[143]!

William Radice has suggested that «Tagore's art is a vulnerable art» and

[140] At Shelidah and Sajadpur Tagore wrote thirty-six tales for *Sādhanā* (striving), a short-lived Calcutta magazine (October 1891 - October 1895), of which he was the (absent) editor since November 1894. Those stories were collected in a number of early editions. See W. RADICE's bibliographical notes in R. TAGORE 1994: 295-302. The complete Visva-Bharati edition of Tagore's short stories was published after the poet's death: R. TAGORE 1946-47.

[141] In his journal *Prabāsī* (The Emigrant), Ramananda Chatterjee criticized Tagore's style in the short story *Niśīthe* (In the middle of the night), appeared in *Sādhanā* in 1894. His criticism has been reproduced in *PRABĀSĪ* 1976: 16. Quoted and translated in W. RADICE 1994: 26.

[142] Tagore's interview with Buddhadeva Bose in: R. TAGORE 1946-47: IV, 307. Quoted and translated in W. RADICE 1994: 27.

[143] N.K. SIDHANTA 1961: 291.

«his short stories are his most vulnerable productions of all.»[144] Tagore – Radice argues – was aware of their weakness and the criticism they raised presumably led him to give up writing stories[145]. This is possibly true, nevertheless if we ask why Tagore felt the need to 'create' a language for them, we have to consider also other aspects. We have seen a case in the 1880s Italian literature: Giovanni Verga felt the need to 'create' a language for *I Malavoglia*, his novel centred on a community of Sicilian fishermen. Such a need was dictated by the search for a literary form which seemed to him «absolutely necessary», irrespectively of any consideration for the reader, or for the success of the book. To achieve that form he undertook a serious study of Sicilian folklore, but not for that his language was less 'artificial'. The 'form' in Verga as well as in all Italian *Verismo* was an aesthetic principle that remained dominant over the rest. The 'form' in Tagore's writing of the 1890s was a poetics in which lyricism met realism without merging. His was by no means an isolated case in modernism. To rest on a comparative discourse with modern Italian literature, there are some examples: from Giovanni Pascoli (1855-1912) – a poet who had been interestingly compared with Tagore –[146] to Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922-1975). If we dig out the social roots of their works, we will find the complex and contradictory relations of the intellectuals with the peasants' world (fading into a new urban lumpenproletariat in Pasolini's novels and movies). Critics may argue whether in Tagore lyricism intrudes reality, or rather realism intrudes a mystical world of self and intimacy. They may as well argue whether his results were actually convincing, but there is also a socio-historical aspect which is important to stress. It has been rightly observed that Verga was revolutionary in style, but conservative in politics. His picture of the poor classes was «the more faithful and poetic, the more it was socially unengaged and ideologically conservative»[147]. He truly sympathized with 'the defeated', but he remained an aristocrat aloof from any idea of social reform. Everything considered, Verga was a typical representative of his social class, the Sicilian *galantuomini* (gentlemen, or bhadralok if you like), and a supporter of Francesco Crispi's imperialist politics. Rabindranath Tagore was certainly an aristocrat, but his personality and his family

[144] W. RADICE 1994: 25-26.

[145] Ibid.: 26-27.

[146] Soon after the Italian translation of *The Crescent Moon*: R. TAGORE 1915, Elena Beccarini Crescenzi, pupil of the Indologist P.E. Pavolini at the University of Florence, wrote an interesting article. She analysed the theme of childhood in three genres of Indian literature (epics, drama and gnomology) and attempted to make a comparison between the different attitudes of Buddhist and Hindu writers. She also stressed the convergence of the theme of childhood in Pascoli and Tagore and its significance in their poetry. She translated seven poems in verse from *Śiśu* (the child) [Tagore's work on which was based *The Crescent Moon*, R. TAGORE 1913], originally appeared in R. TAGORE 1903-04, by using the metre of Giovanni Pascoli. BECCARINI CRESCENZI 1916.

[147] ASOR ROSA 1965: 74-76.

story indissolubly tied him up to social reformism. Most of his ideas about rural development, village reconstruction, co-operative principle, and the all-life lasting project of rural education first took shape during his long stay in Eastern Bengal. Tagore's seminal role in the swadeshi movement was not only cultural: during the 1890s and early 1900s he repeatedly attacked the government policies and the racial discrimination of Indians in the Bengali periodical press[148].

As above mentioned, the new wave of nationalism in Bengal brought about a reorientation of the bhadralok intellectuals' relations with folk culture. A powerful drive came from Rabindranath's address «*Svadeśī Samāj*» (national society), a sort of manifesto of the swadeshi movement in Bengal. Tagore delivered his speech at the Minerva and Curzon theatres on 7 and 18 *Sravana* 1311 B.S. (July-August 1904)[149]. Written in a transitional phase characterized by a certain leaning towards revivalism, with all its emphasis on the unity of Hinduism and the village as a repository of tradition, «*Svadeśī Samāj*» showed how «Rabindranath's political ideas» had by then «attained the clarity of a programme»[150]. Volunteers were urged to leave the city and go to the villages «spreading social and political enlightenment in the melās and through magic-lantern lectures.»[151] Volunteers were above all asked to revive folk traditions and ancient village institutions.

In this unconditional faith on the potentialities of popular Hinduism, it is visible an important shift of emphasis from a folk-culture mainly considered for its 'objects' (rhymes, stories, or crafts whatever), as though crystallized in a late Victorian museum[152], to a folk-culture considered for its live 'activities' (*melā*-s, *j'ātrā*-s, story-telling). The *melā* (fair) and the *j'ātrā* (performance) soon became important vehicles of the swadeshi propaganda. At times the popular itinerant theatre freely borrowed folk themes, thus replacing the traditional role of story-tellers in a politicized way. Great fortune had the nationalist plays by Dvijendra Lal Ray[153], as well as the reading of Tagore's poems in the villages. However the projection of popular Hinduism as the true Bengal's folk-culture foreshadowed an ominous course: the passage of many swadeshi activists from national-revolutionary bourgeois politics to communalist politics.

[148] The list of the 1890s Tagore's political articles in Sumit SARKAR 1973: 52, n. 77.

[149] «Svadeśī Samāj» was originally published as a pamphlet in 1904. An English translation appeared in R. TAGORE 1921.

[150] Sumit SARKAR 1973: 54.

[151] Ibid.

[152] The Indian Museum of Calcutta was established in 1814 as the first istitution of that kind in a colonial society. Its early ethnographic collections provide a good illustration of the Victorian classificatory attitude towards India's popular culture.

[153] See on him P. GUHA-THAKURTA 1930: 143-194.

Tagore's message was enthusiastically received by a number of students who left from Calcutta to propagate the swadeshi programme in the *mofussil* (countryside), mostly in their ancestral places. The hub of the swadeshi organizations in the rural districts were the national schools and the local *samiti*-s – some of them actually engaged in reviving local traditions. Therefore Bengali nationalists entered the field of folkloric research. They did it as amateurs, so to say, and in a very peculiar perspective. It could be easily argued that the nationalist approach to folklore was merely instrumental, being halfway a means of propaganda and would-be national integration. It can be noticed also that the function of folklore in support of India's unity in diversity (mainly through folkloric groups of dancers, musicians, etc.) has been widely adopted after independence[154]. There are, however, some aspects of the nationalist approach to folklore in Bengal that can be understood only through the analysis of its social and cultural background. That approach exhibited many traits of continuity with the nineteenth century 'bhadralok ideology' (a term that would need more deepening), a more insidiously communalist attitude, and the replacing of the general contempt of peasants with the ideological appropriation of their culture.

In the spreading of the swadeshi agitation into Bengal's rural areas, two districts became prominent for the nationalists' social work: Barisal and Maldah, where Aswini Kumar Dutta and Benoy Kumar Sarkar (1887-1949) were respectively active. B.K. Sarkar, born in Maldah, had been a member of the Dawn Society, established in 1897 by Satish Chandra Mukherjee (1865-1948), and one of the leaders of the Calcutta students' movement in 1905. He was bound to spend a long time abroad, from 1914 to 1925, and to become a prominent figure of Calcutta's intellectual life in the 1930s and early 1940s[155].

During the summer vacation of 1907 Benoy Sarkar left Calcutta to join Maldah's national schools. On June 6, 1907, he established the *Māldaha Jātīya Śikṣā-Samiti* [Maldah Committee of National Education] as a branch of the National Council of Education of Bengal[156]. A Literary Research Department was constituted within the *samiti*, with which a number of scholars associated. Some were members of the Baṅgīya Sāhitya Pariṣat, some were local people with a keen interest in folklore and old Bengali manuscripts. One of them was Haridas Palit, a collector of Sanskrit and Bengali manuscripts who had been

[154] H.K. RANGANATH 1980.

[155] G. FLORA 1997.

[156] The National Council of Education of Bengal was a body coordinating the activities of private native schools and institutes along the lines of swadeshi principles. It was formally established on May 23, 1906, with Dr. Rashbehari Ghose (1845-1921), a prominent bhadralok, as its president.

studying for years the traditions of the *Gambhīrā* festivities in Maldah – a festival held over the last five days of *Caitra* (the Bengali month running from the middle of March to the middle of April), known in other districts of Bengal as the Śaiva festival *Gajān*.

In 1912 (B.S. 1319) the Māldaha Jātiyā Śikṣā-Samiti published *Ādyer Gambhīrā* [The Gambhīrā of Ādya] by Haridas Palit[157]. The epithet Ādya (first, primordial) was given to the supreme goddess associating with god in the work of creation. She is Durgā in her appearance of Caṇḍi, Caṇḍikā, or Caṇḍā (wrathful), the *Śakti* of Śiva who destroyed the *asura* Mahiṣa. That mytical event is celebrated in Bengal at Durgāpūjā. Caṇḍi is said to be identical with Kālī as well as with the Buddhist Vajrayāna goddesses and the non-Aryan autochthonous goddesses in general[158]. Ādya is also called Gaurī in the sections on cosmogony of the *Śunya-purāṇa* and *Dharma-pūjā-vidhāna*, both medieval Bengali texts associated with the aboriginal cult of Dharma Ṭhākura[159].

In 1917 B.K. Sarkar's *The Folk-Element in Hindu Culture* was published in London. There are some interesting facts about this book. To begin with, its title is misleading, as the book does not deal with Indian popular traditions in general, but it is a case-study, as it were, of the *Gambhīrā* festival in Maldah and its analogues (the Śaiva *Gajān* festival and the *Nīla-pūjā* of Eastern Bengal). It was written when its author was abroad and the title-page says he was assisted by Hemendra K. Rakshit, who lived in the U.S.A., but nowhere it is said how Rakshit did assisted him[160]. In the ocean of B.K. Sarkar's bibliography this is the only title devoted to folklore. It is unclear whether this book had been the outcome of a field-work. In his preface (dated Middle West, U.S.A., April 15, 1915), Benoy Sarkar states that *Gambhīrā* had been «a matter of personal knowledge to the author for the last twenty years»[161]. But he says also he was «indebted to the work of the folklorists associated with the literary academies of

[157] Haridas Palit wrote also a historical novel (H. PALIT 1915) set in a rural village of 12th century Bengal. During the 1930s Palit worked for the Bengali Manuscripts Department at the Calcutta University, under the direction of Khagendra Nath Mitra.

[158] A. BHARATI 1965: 94; D. KINSLEY 1987: 116-119.

[159] S. DAS GUPTA 1969: 281, 313-314.

[160] B.K. SARKAR 1917. Hemendra Kishore Rakshit, born in Dacca, was one of the sixteen Bengali students selected by B.K.Sarkar to go to the United States thanks to a scholarship of the National Council of Education. In 1911-12 he joined the Department of Economics at the Wisconsin State University – Madison. Afterwards he settled in the U.S.A. as a businessman. His name is mentioned in the papers of the San Francisco Trial (1917) and in Lajpat Rai's American manuscript as a supporter of the Ghadar Party and its Indo-German network in America and Japan during world war I. In 1920 he was President of the Hindusthan Association of America, as emerges from a correspondence file of the Indian National Congress [Nehru Memorial Museum & Library, AICC Papers, F. No. 15 of 1920 (General Secretary V.J. Patel correspondence file)]. See: G. FLORA 1997: 83-84, 503.

[161] B.K. SARKAR 1917: XIII.

Bengal»» (Baṅgīya Sāhitya Pariṣat of Calcutta, Rangpur and Dacca) – and particularly to Haridas Palit's book:

> The author is fortunate in having secured the assistance of Mr. Haridas Palit [...] A portion of Mr.Palit's notes has been published in the form of articles in Bengali reviews, and also as a book which has been liberally drawn upon for this work[162].

The most remarkable fact about Benoy Sarkar's book is that, although it reflects certain constructions peculiar to his sociology of culture, it seems to have summed up the Bengali nationalists' attitude towards Bengal's folklore. There we find views and interpretations which circulated among the 'swadeshi' intellectuals – notably that: i) Bengal's folklore bore witness to a long lost Buddhist influence; ii) Bengal's old traditions had spread throughout nearby and far off regions; iii) Bengal's folklore bore witness to the vitality of popular Hinduism, whose assimilative character had prevailed through ages. Points one and two originated in two trends of the Bengali historical research of the time, namely the above mentioned 'Buddhist theory' and the 'Greater India' theory. The view that India had been a colonial power of old had become fashionable among the nationalist historians of Benoy Sarkar's generation[163]. It is, however, the third point the most important. Equation between 'popular culture' and 'national culture' in Bengal was complicated by various factors. The presence of a massive Muslim community, tribal communities and the caste-system itself implied the existence of separate popular traditions – though a number of them were to some extent convergent as a result of exchange, borrowings, or dominance. Apparently Bengali nationalists did not feel at ease with pluralism and Benoy Sarkar in his book eludes the issue of the tensions between different traditions. In the chapter on «Islam in popular Hinduism» one of his major arguments is that ascending Islam in Mediaeval Bengal accelerated the decay of Buddhism and its overall absorption into Shaivaism.

> We find traces of Islamization or adaptation to the conditions of the Islamic

[162] Ibid.: VIII.

[163] Along with the classic works of Rajendralal Mitra (R.L. MITRA 1875-1880 and R.L. MITRA 1878), Sarkar mentions the works of his young friends, Radhakumud Mookerji and Narendra Nath Law (1887-1965). Radhakumud Mookerji, brother of the sociologist Radhakamal, had been Benoy's college mate. Member of the Dawn Society in his youth and then of the Hindu Sabha of Bengal, he was one of the most prolific (Hindu) nationalist historians. His early book, Radhakumud MOOKERJI 1910, conveyed the idea that ancient Indian kingdoms were colonial powers. The spreading of Buddhism throughout central and eastern Asia and the inscriptions on stone proving the existence of Hindu-Javanese kingdoms were assumed as the evidence of a 'Greater India'. This theme was developed by other nationalist historians, e.g. R.C. MAJUMDAR 1927.

> world in both the declining Buddhistic lore as well as the rising Hindu literature of the time. It was, infact, an age of rapid assimilation as we have remarked above – give and take of ideas; and every bit of socio-religious and literary picture of the day bears witness to all the three factors – Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism, that made up the complex web of Indian life.
>
> The Dharma Gajan songs and hymns, interspersed with Mohammedan ideas, are a clear proof of the fact that after the establishment of the Mohammedan kingdoms the followers of Dharma were not allowed to offer their worship openly[164].

B.K. Sarkar's perception was apparently conditioned by the idea that such aboriginal cults as that of Dharma Ṭhākura were genuine expression of Buddhism. He also missed the point of the syncretic character of those aboriginal cults: he was rather inclined to view it as a matter of expediency:

> During Mohammedan supremacy there had been a time when the Hindus also could not openly profess the creed of their coscience. Then they also had to take recourse to various tricks to throw dust in the eyes of the Kazis. Thus they introduced the worship of Satya Pira (a Mohammedan saint), which was only a pseudonym for their own «Narayana» or Visnu[165].

One of the major Indian nationalists' concerns was to elude or to belittle the significance of the caste-system. As nationalists claimed to rewrite India's true history, tensions between caste-Hindus and all the other segments of society should be erased. The swadeshi movement marked the peak of this intellectual operation. The following years were to show the crude political implications of the tension between caste-Hindus and outcastes in Bengal – particularly after the Communal Award of August 1932.

The idea of a popular Hinduism, in which caste distinctions play a secondary role, had made its way in the nationalist sociological literature of the 1910s. The projection of popular Hinduism as the true dimension of Bengal's folklore lay at the very core of Benoy Sarkar's book. His declared objective was to demonstrate the importance of the «folk-element» in the making of Indian civilization:

> In the reconstruction of Indian history, modern scholarship has to be devoted more and more to the exposition of the influence that the masses of the country have exerted in the making of its civilization. [...]

[164] B.K. Sarkar 1917: 218-219.

[165] Ibid.: 220.

> The masses and the folk have contributed to the making of Hindu culture in all its phases no less than the court and the classes. [...]
>
> The caste-system has never been a disintegrating factor in Hindu communal existence, and is most probably a very recent institution.
>
> Hinduism is an eclectic and ever-expansive socio-religious system built up through the assimilation of diverse ethnic, natural and spiritual forces during the successive ages of Indian history[166].

«Hinduism is a sponge», wrote Percival Spear[167]. However it is not easy to draw a borderline between the assimilative character of Hinduism and its pattern of dominance.

The most interesting parts of Sarkar's book were devoted to the description of the festival – performances, songs, dances, masks, decorations. The picture reveals narrative modes mainly belonging to the Śaiva tradition, in which, however, aboriginal elements emerge. For instance, Sarkar speaks of 'techniques of ecstasy' through dancing and smoke inhaling[168]. Another interesting feature described is the *bhūta-bhara*, or possession by spirits. The term *bhūta* here is rendered with its commonest meaning 'ghost', but it may mean a 'deified dead', sort of local god. It is, Sarkar says, the *Gambhīrā* of low castes, such as kicha and Poliha, officiated without priests:

> The *jāgarana* (i.e. passing sleepless nights) is observed with dance and song and other festivities. It is said that ghosts and spirits of the village and also of other adjacent villages do possess and serve them. They believe in the existence of supernatural beings and offer worship to them in every house. [...] According to them, ghosts of one village quarrel with those of another; and when a Bhakta is possessed by a village ghost his words are not true; but when he is possessed by one of a different village his predictions come out true[169].

Possession by local spirits and *bhūta* cerimonies take place in different parts of India in the context of ritual perfomances. Though their symbolism and ideology may greatly vary, they mostly belong to the 'folk traditions' as distinct from the 'great tradition'[170].

When Benoy Sarkar wrote *The Folk-Element in Hindu Culture*, the

[166] Ibid.: VII, X.

[167] T.G.P. SPEAR 1958: 57. Quoted in R. INDEN: 1990: 85.

[168] B.K. SARKAR 1917: 54-56.

[169] Ibid.: 89.

[170] On the *bhūta* ceremonies in Southern India see P.J. CLAUS 1973 and P.J. CLAUS 1989. The phenomenon of spirit possession in India has been widely studied from a psychiatric perspective; see S. KAKAR 1982, particularly chapter III and related bibliography.

Gambhīrā festival had already acquired the features of a modern religious *melā* (fair), with handicraft exhibits, village fundraising, etc. He underlined the ultimate sense of the festival as an «instrument of national culture», promoting taste and «artistic sense of the people» and providing «a powerful school of moral education and political training»[171].

The swadeshi movement's strong commitment to popular Hinduism had dangerous implications. The need was felt to substantiate the idea of national culture through a live tradition, proposed in a sort of new 'oecumenic' light. True, the intellectuals of the time, Indian and European alike, were encouraged to perceive Indian folklore primarily as religious folklore, ultimately seen as a mark of communal identity. Interestingly enough, out of the six suggestions, made by such a veteran of Indian folkloric research as William Crooke, concerning a «programme for anthropological investigations in India» (which inaugurated the first issue of *Man in India* in March 1921), five related to aspects of religious folklore[172]. Nevertheless, the projection of 'Hindu' as 'National' in cultural terms implied an underlying communalist mind at the core itself of the Indian nationalist ideology[173]. The 1907 communalist riots in Mymensingh, for which economic explanations have been often advanced, although less gruesome than the following riots of 1926-30 and 1940s revealed, nonetheless, the communalist tensions concealed in the Bengal's politics of the time and marked the decay of the swadeshi movement itself. In the following decades, with the polarization of Bengal's politics along communalist lines, religious festivals became more and more the principal theatre of incidents between Hindus and Muslims. In colonial India festivals, as 'public arenas', could be perceived as a 'metaphor' of the community, where a religious group was enabled to show its power to integrate and cohere different identities and to define a 'sacred space'[174].

As the process of polarization grew stronger, the approach to folklore became narrower. In the sociology of Radhakamal Mookerji (1889-1968), brother of the historian Radhakumud, folklore became one of the functional elements of the *saṅg* (community), defining its basic values and ideology[175]. By 1920 a communalist interpretation of folklore was not yet accomplished

[171] B.K. SARKAR 1917: 14-22.

[172] W. CROOKE 1921.

[173] There are various interpretations regarding the overlapping of communalism and nationalism in India's political history. The analysis carried out by Partha Chatterjee about the relations between 'organized politics' and 'communal politics' in Bengal seems to me still valuable to understand certain basic aspects of the process. See P. CHATTERJEE 1982.

[174] See for this interpretation S.B. FREITAG 1980 and S.B. FREITAG 1989: 134-135.

[175] RADHAKAMAL MOOKERJI 1951.

in Bengal, however a certain 'reductionism' inherent in the nationalist vision of folklore had been paving the way for it.

Reduction, here, means homologation with some dominant categories. The equation 'popular' = 'national' would require the homologation of folk culture with the ideology and the aspirations of the nationalist leadership and the social groups that supported it. In that process not only the tribal/aboriginal element was cast away, but also the Bengali women's special role in the oral transmission was discarded or belittled. Not many Bengali intellectuals felt genuinely attracted by the folk female world. One notable exception was Abanindranath Tagore, who wrote a pioneering book on the *vrata*-s of Bengal[176]. The Sanskrit word *vrata* means 'religious vow', or any else act of devotion and religious observance (particularly fast). In Bengal the term is used to describe a range of domestic rites mainly performed by womenfolk without the presence of priests[177]. Abanindranath Tagore classified *vrata*-s into three categories: Śāstrīk (scriptural) *vrata*, *Kumārī vrata* (those practised by girls) and *Nārī vrata* (those practised by married women) nowadays also known, with some variants, as *strī ācāra*. Nearly all those female rites have the common aim to protect relatives, to maintain prosperity and to safeguard children's and husbands' health. Just because *vrata*-s (which are still performed) represent a female appropriation of cerimonial functions different from (and, at times, opposed to) public cerimonies and festivals, current anthropology describes them as 'parallel rituals'[178]. Each *vrata* has a specific purpose and is accompanied by a story (*vrata kathā*). Elements of those stories are often depicted in the *ālipanā*-s (magic diagrams), drawn by women in rice paste on floors and walls. Diagrams too are an important aspect of the ritual[179]. In the *vrata* worship the role of the goddess is prominent. It is she who presides over many vital events of village life. Lakṣmī is invoked for prosperity and good harvests, but it is the aboriginal/local personification of the mother-goddess to be dominant[180]. The local goddess is rooted in specific, local villages – which are supposed to have a special relation with her myth. Although she is characterized as protective, she can be also violent, disruptive. She is danger and illness. Many village goddesses are associated with desease and during epidemics they may play contradictory roles: they may defend the village from the disease, or they may be identified with the disease itself. This is the case with the Bengali goddess Śītalā Devī, associated with smallpox, even today worshipped for preservation from skin af-

[176] Abanindranath TAGORE 1919.

[177] There is also a class of *śāstrīk vrata* performed by priests on special occasions.

[178] L.M. FRUZZETTI 1994: 102.

[179] S.K. RAY 1961; R. SKELTON 1979: 57-62.

[180] All over India, village goddesses are often represented by uncarved stones, trees and diagrams.

fection. Ṣaṣṭī is invoked for the safeguarding of children soon after birth. Manasā Devī, the snake-goddess, is worshipped for protection against snake-bite[181]. All in all, ambivalence is the main feature of the folk goddesses' nature and often the myths concerning their origins variously present the theme of injustice done to women by men[182].

The tale associated with the *vrata* (*vrata kathā*) has the function of strengthening the efficacy of the ritual. Told by a woman for a women's audience, it mostly has the features of a folk tale. Generally speaking, in the cult of *grāmadevatā* (village deities) the borderline between myth and folk tale is uncertain. It is the context which determines to which sphere a narrative belongs. As A.K. Ramanujan (1929-1993) observed, myths and folk tales may have much in common, but they use the materials in different ways:

> Myths are replete with proper names of places and persons; they deal largely with public events like wars, origins of worlds, and foundings of communities. Folktale characters and locales rarely have names and deal with familial themes. [...] The supernatural in folktales is not divine and cosmic but magical and worldly, frequently comic. [...] Myths, by and large, divinize the human; folktales humanize the divine[183].

In one of the early studies on the Bengali *vrata*-s, we read the *vrata kathā* of Suvacanī – a Bengali local goddess symbolized also with a swan (like Sarasvatī) whose name, the author says, could have been a corruption of 'Śubhacaṇḍī' (the benign Caṇḍī, or Caṇḍikā)[184]. The story, in short, runs as follows. Once upon a time, in the old kingdom of Kāliṅga (approximately corresponding to modern Orissa), there was a poor widow who had only one son. She was unhappy as she was too poor to feed him well. One day the boy asked for some meat and she replied they could not afford it. The boy, then, assured his mother he would procure some meat. The following day he caught a lame swan from a flock belonging to the king and killed it. His mother cooked it for him. In the evening the king's servants in charge of the flock began to look for the missing swan. When they saw its feathers near the widow's house, they took the boy and threw him into jail. The poor widow nearly maddened with grief. She be-

[181] In the northern districts of Bihar adjoining Bengal on the East, Manasā is called Bisahari. Here too her worship presents a pictorial figuration, not in wall paintings, but in large paper caskets made by women and men of Mālī caste for the goddess festival celebrated in Purnea district during the monsoon rains of August – when the risk of snake-bite is higher. M. ARCHER 1977: 67-69.

[182] D. KINSLEY 1987: 197-211. See also E.C. DIMOCK Jr. 1962; E.C. DIMOCK Jr.-A.K. RAMANUJAN 1964; E.C. DIMOCK Jr. 1969; E.C. DIMOCK Jr. 1982.

[183] A.K. RAMANUJAN 1987: XVII-XVIII.

[184] P.C. BAGCHI 1922; originally a paper read at the 2nd session of the Oriental Conference, held in Calcutta in January 1922.

gan to pray the goddess Suvacanī with great devotion. The goddess had pity on her: she appeared to the king of Kāliṅga in a dream and threatened him with ruinous consequences if he failed to set the boy free the next morning and to give him his daughter in marriage and his kingdom as dowry. The following morning the king rose early and carried out the goddess's will[185].

There was a world of difference in worshipping Durgā as the manifestation of god's creative and unpredictable power (*śakti*) – as many Calcutta's affluent Śaiva-Śākta families would do – and the *pūjā* of the poor and illiterate peasant women, who invoked the goddess's manifold aspects for any practical purpose. The feminine folk world of the *Devī* hardly appealed the educated bhadralok. Bankimcandra Chattopadhyay (1838-1894), the great novelist and outstanding figure of nineteenth century Bengali culture, had projected the cult of the Mother Goddess as the symbol of nationhood. Yet his Bhārat Mātā (Mother India) had hardly to do with Śītalā, or Manasā. Bhārat Mātā definitely became a nationalist icon during the swadeshi movement. The song «Bande Mātaram», from Bankimcandra's *Ānandamaṭh*, was sung during the swadeshi processions[186]. The painting «Bhārat Mātā» (1904-05), by Abanindranath Tagore, gave the goddess her modern allure[187]. Finally, the Bhārat Mātā Mandir in Varanasi, built thanks to Raja Shivaprasad Gupta (1883-1944), gave her the status of a Hindu 'state deity'[188].

The late nineteenth century Bengali intellectuals who tried to keep the legacy of the 'Bengali Renaissance', particularly those belonging to the Brāhma Samāj tradition, disliked the primitive and ambivalent goddess's lore. The Bengali 'enlightenment' had virtually laid its foundation on the rejection of the folk religion, labelled as superstitions or abominable practices. Also the new generation of intellectuals of the early-twentieth century, however, was somehow far removed from understanding the roots of popular culture. They openly broke with westernized modernism, yet their assertive new Hinduism was deeply rooted in the 'great tradition'. The evolution of the most famous Bengal's spiri-

[185] P.C. BAGCHI 1922: 55-56.

[186] B.C. CHATTOPADHYAY 1882. *Ānandamaṭh* (The Abbey of Bliss) was first tranlated into English by Sri Aurobindo up to chapter 15th of part I (the following chapters were translated by his brother, Barindrakumar Ghosh). Aurobindo published the English translation of «Vande Mātaram» in his journal, *Karmayogin*, 20 Nov. 1909.

[187] This picture, painted in the 'wash' technique, was the result of Abanindranath's involvement in the anti-partition movement in 1904-05. Apparently, it had been originally conceived as Bāṅga-mātā (Mother Bengal). T. GUHA-THAKURTA 1992: 255-260.

[188] Shiva Prasad Gupta, an Ārya Samajist, associated himself with the swadeshi movement of Bengal in 1906-10 and afterwards with Bengali national-revolutionaries abroad. G. FLORA 1997: 71-83, 497-498. For a description of the Mother India Temple at Varanasi – which does not contain any image in its sanctum, but a large relief map of India – see D.L. ECK 1993: 38-39. The definition of Bhārat Mātā as «the first Hindu state deity» in C.J. FULLER 1992: 42.

tual movement at the turn of the century is highly significant. The modern saint, Ramakrishna Paramahamsa (1834-1886), had derived his religious eclecticism and his religious metaphors from the simple life of rural Bengal. His most distinguished disciple, the young intellectual Narendra Nath Datta better known as Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), was to expunge much of that popular background from the Ramakrishna cult, thus transforming it into a veritable 'bhadralok-cult'[189].

In Bengal, Hindu revivalism as well as Hindu nationalism aimed at homologizing different identitites. In this process, by the end of the 1920s, tribals and non caste-Hindus became the target of a new Hindu missionary zeal sustained by communalist politics. *Śuddhi*, 'purification' of 'polluted peoples', became the watchward of such Hindu communalist organizations as the Hindu Sabha and the Hindu Mission. Their aim was to reclaim the low castes in order to make up a unified Hindu political community[190]. The folk/aboriginal culture of Bengal was doomed to wane and revive only in the pages of modern anthropological literature – along the lines of a process that can be really said global. The world of Bengal's organized politics likely accelerated it in many ways.

Also the intellectuals, who had set up the enterprise of studying Bengal's folklore, reduced its universe of meanings to some dominant models. This is apparent even in the aesthetically privileged realm of fables. We have seen how D.C. Sen described the heroines of Mitra Majumdar's fairy tales. In his opinion, they personified the eternal ideal of Indian womanhood in a simpler form than the Paurāṇic figuration of Sītā, or Sāvitrī. Such a general view turned into a sort of censorship, as 'obscene' female characters and roles were banned from the folkloric research of the time. This was the case with the above mentioned *vagina dentata* stories, or the incest-tales, which mainly move around the female world and, as Irawati Karve first observed, are told invariably by women to girls[191]. The role of women storytellers was not denied, but, as somehow implied in D.C. Sen's appreciation, it was as though only men were enabled to transform fairy tales into literary matter and serious object of study. Incidentally, this idea is rooted in the western approach too[192].

In conclusion, it would be unjust to deny the significance of the reorientation on folk culture brought about by nationalism in Bengal. Literally the best minds of the 1900s new generation believed that the living heritage of Bengal's folklore was part and parcel of the 'national culture'. Yet that was not enough

[189] SUMIT SARKAR 1985; SUMIT SARKAR 1992.

[190] JOYA CHATTERJI 1994: 192-193.

[191] I. KARVE 1950, cited in A.K. RAMANUJAN 1984: 234-261. Ramanujan analysed eight variants of Indian Oedipus/Electra-tales, stressing their different quality from the Greek pattern.

[192] See M. WARNER 1994: 1-197.

to let folklore emerge as a «conception of the world». Reductions and omissions effected by bhadralok intellectuals – including those concerned with politics – in terms of ideology corresponded to the inherent opposition and seclusion, which characterized the relations of different social orders – the high and the low. An 'official' vision of the world confronted a 'non-official' one – which can be summed up – following Radice's footsteps – in a range of opposites belonging to the spheres of ideology and society:

HIGH	LOW
Great (Brahmanical) Tradition	Folk Tradition
Literary	Oral
Caste-Hindu	Tribal
Male	Female
God	Goddess
Calcutta	Mofussil
Bhadralok	Chotalok
Zāmindār/Mahājan	Raiyat

Finally, I present here in abridged version (dialogues and songs have been shortened) two tales, «Mālañcamālā» and «Kiraṇmālā», respectively from the *Ṭhākurdādār Jhuli* and the *Ṭhākurmār Jhuli*. The former is based on the English translation by D.C. Sen, the latter on the original Bengali[193]. They mean to illustrate some of the materials we have dealt with so far. Even in a bare form (motif/sequence/structure) stories like these can be read at different levels. They are objects of enjoyment and, no doubt, enjoyment was one of the targets of Daksinaranjan Mitra-Majumdar's art. They can be seen as the product of the simple and witty genius of Bengali people transmitted through a literary form – and certainly Indian nationalists saw them like that. They can be considered as the characterization of general types within a specific (Indian/Bengali) cultural and linguistic context. The story of Mālañcamālā, in particular, can be situated in a gender perspective, as a woman's tale, or, more precisely, as a 'woman-centered tale'[194]. These stories tell of universal meanings, as examples of the many ways in which human imagination has always asserted life against the powers of destruction.

[193] D.C. SEN 1920: 267-322; D.R. MITRA MAJUMDAR 1992: 111-138. There is also an English modern version of Kiranmālā, retold by Geeta Majumdar: G. MAJUMDAR 1971. See Ramanujan's criticism about the series to which this book belongs: A.K. RAMANUJAN 1987: XII-XIII.

[194] A.K. RAMANUJAN 1997: 217-219.

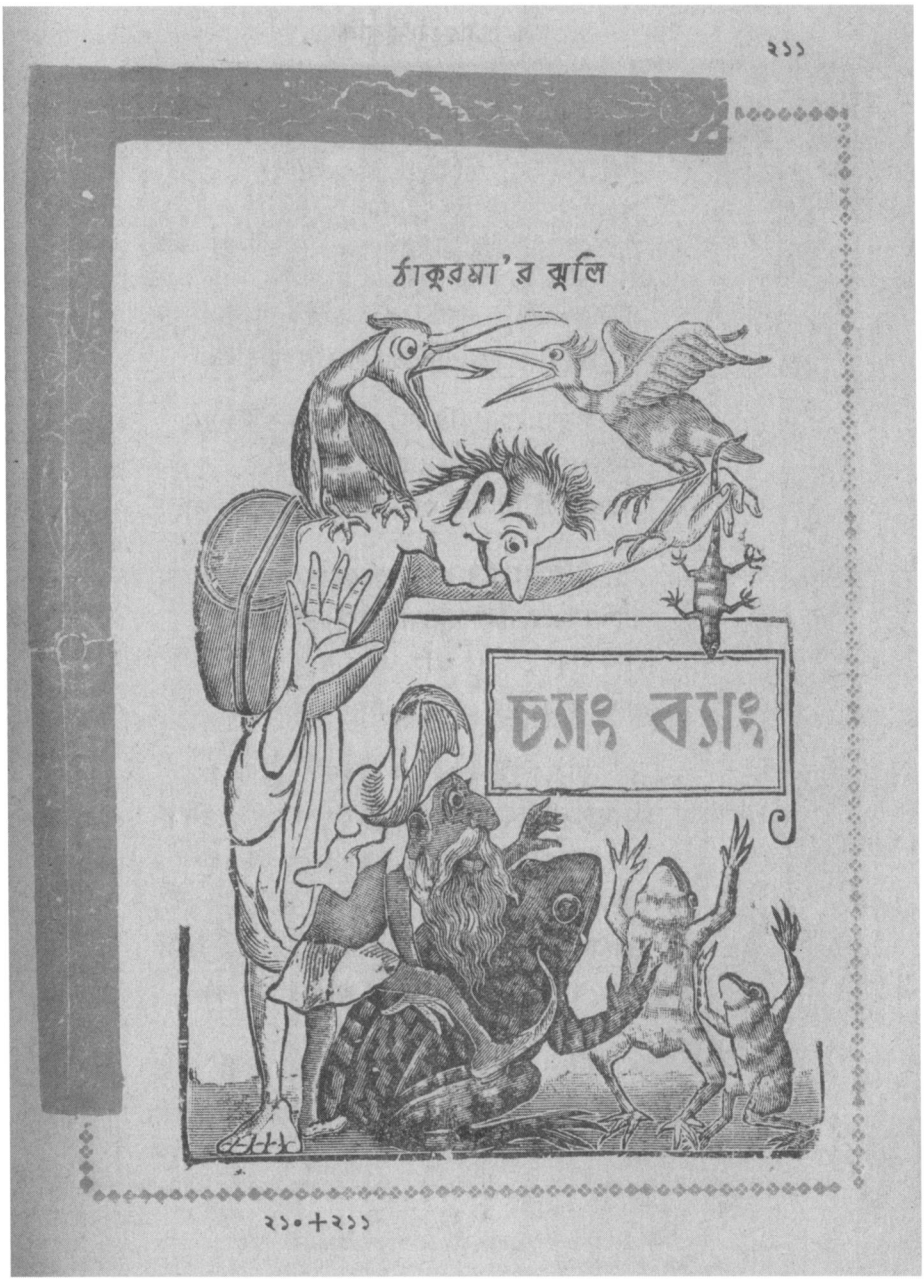

Plate 2: Illustration from D.R. Mitra Majumdar's *Ṭhākurmār Jhuli* (1907), "*Cyāṁ Byāṁ*" (the little fish and the frog). Woodcut by Priyagopad Das from the original drawing by the author.

APPENDIX I: The Story of Mālañcamālā

Once upon a time a childless king summoned all the Brahman astrologers and all the hermits of his country. He asked them to perform ceremonies and sacrifices with a view to having a son. As everything was accomplished, one of them told the king:

«Your majesty, observe fast for three days and three nights. On the fourth day, pay a visit to your orchard. There you will find a pair of golden mangoes. You will eat the fruit on the right side and the queen will eat that on the left.»

For three days and nights the king observed fast and vigil. On the fourth day the favourite horse of his stable, the *Pakṣirāj*[195], stood near his doorway. The king performed the usual rites and then rode to the orchard. There was a mango-tree that had not borne any fruit for three generations and now presented two beautiful mangoes of the colour of gold. The fruits lay half-hid under the green leaves. The king, all pleased, shot arrows at them, but they did not fall. Then he used a hook to pull them, but still they remained stuck to the tree.

«This is very strange», said the king and ordered his men to pluck the mangoes. Ministers, architects, courtiers, all tried one by one, but failed. They tried to climb the tree, which became slippery. One broke his arm and another his leg in the attempt.

The king himself was about to try, when the *kotwal*[196], who was nearby, came forward and asked him the permission to try to climb the tree. As he was a poor fellow, the king's dignitaries raged. How could he dare to approach the king like that? But the king calmly said:

«All right, if you succeed, there will be a shawl for your reward; if you fail, you will go to the scaffold.»

The *kotwal* bowed low. He took up a clod of earth and, muttering some mysterious words, threw it at the fruits that fell down at the first stroke.

[195] *Pakṣirāja*, «King of birds» is an epithet of Garuḍa. It is also the Indian Pegasus, a winged horse.

[196] *Kotwala*, a sort of guardian. D.C. Sen says he should be «a policeman of the status of an inspector». In modern Bengali, in fact, a *kotoyāl* is a policeman, or a constable.

The king rejoyced. He threw his own shawl over the *kotwal*'s shoulders and, riding the *Pakṣirāj*, returned to his palace. But the stalks broke in the way, hence which of the fruits was on the right and which on the left could not be known. In consequence the queen ate the mango that was on the right and the king ate the other one.

After some time the queen became pregnant. The king was glad beyond measure. Ten months passed on. By the king's order, drummers were brought from the city of drummers; tabor-players were brought from the city of tabor-players. The great sound of *kāḍā*, *nākāḍā*, *sānāi*, *chakaḍā*, *mṛdaṅga* and other musical instruments was heard for ten days. On the night of the tenth day a baby was born in the palace; he lay surrounded by a halo of light.

A great celebration started. The king made offerings to the gods and distributed food amongst men and animals[197]. On the sixth night paths strewn with flowers were opened up to the natal room. Through this path Dhārā, Tārā and Vidhātā would go to write the luck of the baby-prince on his forehead[198]. On their way the three gods had to step over a sleeping sentinel, who was lying cross-wise at the threshold. They entered the baby-room with bundles of pens and started their writing job. After three hours one of them, Tārā, threw away his pen and rose up. He found written on the baby-prince's forehead that his life would extend only to twelve days. The gods left in grief and yet they hid their tears, for, if the gods wept, the whole world would cry and be wretched. This time, on their way, they came across a sleeping flower-woman[199] lying cross-wise at the threshold. She had spent the night with other maid-servants telling stories for the queen. Tārā's feet touched her; she awoked and caught hold the god's feet.

«Who are you? The king's darling sleeps inside this room. Even Death has no power to come.»

«I am the God of Luck, woman, leave my feet.»

[197] In a footnote D.C. Sen says this is a Buddhist or Jaina custom.

[198] In another chapter, D.C. Sen writes:

«The popular notions about gods which these tales unfold, seem strange and unfamiliar. [...] (In «Malanchamala») Vidhātā fulfils a function which shows him not at all like the creator Brahmā whose name he bears in these stories. The duty of the former seems to be only to write the «luck» of a new born baby on its forehead. In this arduous task he is assisted by his two companions Dhārā and Tārā. [...] They set down the providential decree by some mysterious scrawlings on the forehead of the infant, and seem to do it automatically under the directions of a higher power. This power appears to be the *karmic* law over which Dhārā, Tārā and Bidhātā have no hands.» D.C. SEN 1920: 60.

The Vedic name Vidhātar (in Sanskrit Vidhātṛ), 'disposer', 'dispenser', 'arranger', is an epithet of Viśvakarman, the divine architect of the universe. He is associated with the Vedic god Dhātar (Sanskrit, Dhātṛ), one of the eight Āditya-s, and both interchange with Brahmā as creator. Vidhātar is also a god of fertility (ṚgVeda, VI, 50,12) and Dhātar is identified with the year and invoked for wealth, longevity and rain. See M. and J. STUTLEY 1977: 77, 332. As Vidhātṛ and Dhātṛ are associated in domestic rites, the name Dhārā could be a corruption of Dhātar. In fact, the names Dhārā and Tārā belong to two goddesses. The latter is the well-known Tantric goddess, worshipped by Hindus and Buddhists, and one of the ten Mahāvidyā-s. The former is one of the name given to the Mahādevī (*Lalitā-sahasrānāmā*, 955) and commonly associated with earth. See D. KINSLEY 1987: 179. In this tale the three divine characters seem to play rather the role of fairies.

[199] A lady gardener, or florist, in modern Bengali *phulaoʼālī*.

«God of Luck! Tell me, please, what have you written on the baby's forehead?»

The god felt troubled and did not reply. The flower-woman tied his feet tightly with her apron. Then Tārā let fall the drop of tear, that he had hid so long, over her and said:

«What more shall I say, woman, the prince's life will extend to twelve days.»

Twelve days! Only twelve days! As the woman cried the whole world seemed to burst. The queen arose with a start. The king awoke and immediately reached the room, followed by ministers and courtiers. They were informed and fainted in grief.

The elephants broke their chains, the horses died in the stable. The *Pakṣirāj* maddened. The Brahmins of the city assembled near the mango tree and observed fast. The earth was flooded with tears.

Meanwhile Dhārā, Tārā and Vidhātā had returned to the abode of gods. They met the other gods and lamented over the great injustice done to a son born after so many sacrifices and offerings. The chief of the gods decided to investigate[200]. He assumed the guise of an old Brahmin and came near the mango-tree. As he was surrounded by a halo of light, all the people around approached him and implored him to save the baby-prince's life.

«Well, – said he – even the sun and the moon fall into the jaws of the Demon of Eclipse[201]. Who can alter the divine decree? Yet despair not, I shall be able to say more if I see the child once.»

The king himself took him to the natal room. After careful examination the disguised god said:

«The life of this baby, seven days old, may be prolonged if you can get it married to a girl who has completed her twelfth year today. Adieu.»

The king placed the richest stones and other valuables at his feet, but the god chose only a bright diamond. On his way back, he threw it towards the *kotwal*'s hut and then departed.

Messengers were sent all over the country to seek a princess just twelve years old, but they found none. Things seemed to be at a dead end and all gathered again at the mango tree.

On the other side of the tank facing the Mango tree stood Mālañcamālā, the daughter of the *kotwal* who had completed her twelfth year that day[202]. She was washing the diamond thrown by the god she had found. She had cymbals at her feet and their sound was charming. All the people at the mango tree, including the king and his dignitaries, wondered which was the source of such a celestial music. When they

[200] The name of the 'chief' is not mentioned, but the presence of Vedic gods seems to suggest he was Indra.

[201] In the Vedic times, the demon (*asura*) who causes darkness is Svarbhānu. His Paurāṇic name is Rāhu, the «Seizer», responsible for eclipses of the sun and moon.

[202] Mālañcamālā means the «Garland» (*mālā*) of the «Flower-garden» (*mālañca*).

discovered it was a girl of twelve they felt excited, but when they knew she was the *kotwal*'s daughter they became perplexed. The king fell into a mental confusion. The girl was extremely beautiful: face like the moon, hair of wavy curl, her arms were like the swan's neck and the way she lightly trod on the path... she looked like an image made of gold. But she was the *kotwal*'s daughter after all. The queen was informed; she stated that, if the girl was so beautiful, nothing else should matter.

«Marry her to the prince – she said to her husband – and raise the *kotwal* to the status of a chief.»

The king did not know what to do. He sent a messenger to the *kotwal*. The man prided on the news. Firstly he put on the royal shawl; then he took a spear in his hand and visited his neighbours. He told them:

«I plucked the fruits and now my daughter is going to be married to a prince. The king will be my brother-in-law and you must pay me *nazar*.»[203]

However, his wife was not happy. She felt it was not good to give their daughter in marriage to a baby whose fate was doomed. But Mālañcamālā came forward, asking their parents to allow her to go, as it was the king's command.

«Only, – she said to her father – be sure the king will agree to my conditions.»

«Which conditions?»

«Firstly, whether the bride-groom will be permitted to visit his father-in-law's house. Secondly, whether my father-in-law, the king, and my mother-in-law, the queen, will agree to partake of the food prepared by me. Thirdly, whether they will be prepared to give me dowries and presents as usual on the wedding night.»

The *kotwal* ensured his daughter he would communicate her conditions to the king and left for the royal palace. His wife in tears helped the girl to dress herself.

The *kotwal* met the king and made him know Mālañcamālā's conditions. The king, who was already upset, turned angry. He coldly replied:

«Let the girl first come to the palace for the marriage. Everything will be settled then.»

The *kotwal* came back home and told his daughter the king's reply. Robed in her best dress, Mālañcamālā took leave from her mother and said to her father:

«Father, lead me to the palace, but please ask the king whether I may be permitted to take away my husband's dead body, if he died on the first wedding night.»

The *kotwal* agreed and, as they reached the palace, explained to the king Mālañcamālā's request. This time the king turned furious.

«Why, this rustic girl has the audacity to extort pledges from me in all matters! How dare you worry me? Put the *kotwal* into prison, bring his daughter here and get her married to the prince.»

[203] *Nazar* has various meanings including «Present, gift». In Bengal's agrarian system is an extra-payment made to a landlord. It is also said *Selāmī* (*Sālāmī*), irregular fee or present, illegal extra-payment, bribe, etc.

It was a mockery of marriage, no present of scents, no preparatory rituals, no flowers. The Brahmin recited the *mantra*-s, the baby cried, the queen came to suckle it. The bride went seven times round the baby-prince and then, carrying him in her arms, entered the nuptial room. Suddenly a storm came: rain, wind, thunder and lighting. The towers of the palace broke, the palace itself caught fire. The baby-prince vomited the milk and died in his wife's arms. The queen fainted, the king maddened, the citizens came to the palace and waited near the nuptial room. Thus the king spoke:

«She is a witch, there is no doubt. She is a witch. Drive her out of the room, pick out her eyes and burn them.»

A great agitation took possession of the crowd; angry arms raised on Mālañcamālā. The girl remained quiet and with dignity asked the maidservants to remind the king and queen the words they pledged.

The king decided to satisfy Mālañcamālā's conditions cruelly. Her father, the *kotwal*, was immediately executed to make him meet the prince in the regions where he had gone. As to the second condition, the maidservants were ordered to cut Mālañcamālā's hands off with a knife. And when the girl bravely asked again for her dowry, she was offered an ass, some gravel, a basket of cane, a broken earthen pitcher. A necklace of coconut shells was put around her neck and a basket filled with cow-dung was tied behind her back. Dressed up with rags picked up at the cremation ground, her head shaven, Mālañcamālā was carried round the city on the ass. She was to be banished, but she insisted on the last pledge: as the prince had died in the nuptial room, his corpse should have be given to her.

The enraged king furiously ordered the funeral fire was prepared. The dead prince was given to Mālañcamālā, her nose and ears were cut off and she was thrown into the fire with the baby. Then came down a great outpour of rain that nearly extinguished the fire. Along with it, hordes of evil spirits descended upon the cremation ground[204]. The king and his people were forced to leave the place. They ran for their life and shut the city gate.

In the midst of the fire sat Mālañcamālā, the baby-prince on her lap. As blood gushed forth from her cut nose and ears, the *bhūta*-s licked her. The *bhūta*-s began to speak:

«What will you do with your husband? Offer us his dead body.»

The girl said «No».

The wood of the funeral pyre gradually became stirred with life: agitating hands and legs grew in them. A crowd of ghosts demanded the little dead body, but the girl again said «No»! After some time, the smoke took the shape of thousands grim teeth. A loud laughter resounded.

[204] D.C. Sen translated *bhūta*-s with 'goblins', but the goblins have no special relation with the air and cemeteries in western traditions. The cremation ground is a favourite place for the *preta* (deceased), who has not been offered correct funerary rites (*śrāddha*) and has led a life of sin. After death, this category of *preta*-s may turn into dangerous, malevolent spirits. Their main god is Śiva in his manifestation as *Pretacārin*, 'Roaming among the dead', and their goddess is Kālī.

«Give us the dead child!»

«No.»

From one side, an old hag with a coarse voice claimed the little corpse. From the other, an old man with a grimace threatened her:

«You will be killed ere long, give me the child and save yourself.»

The crocodiles and sea fish came up to the river bank; the spirits that rove in the air came close gaping open their mouths. All claimed the child. Days and months passed on in the darkness. Finally, the Messenger of Death himself, Kāladūta, with his brother Sāladūta came to take the child, but Mālañcamālā sent them away.

Next, then, came an exceedingly beautiful girl, who told Mālañcamālā they had been great friends when they were children.

«I am sorry to see you in such a condition. Oh, what is it? A dead rotten baby in your lap! Throw it away, throw it away!»

Mālañcamālā clasped the baby closer to her breast and said:

«Be witness, oh gods, here is my baby-husband in my lap, if I am chaste and devoted, you tempter, do but touch me and you will be reduced to ashes. I am Mālañcamālā and you are an evil spirit, go hence. Oh you night, if you do not pass away, here do I solemnly say, I will transform the stars into fire and flowers into stars.»

The night passed away trembling. The dawn peeped into the forest. Mālañcamālā felt the apparitions were all gone, but the beautiful girl had remained. It was she who, with a smile, told Mālañcamālā to look at the baby. The baby was gently moving its hands and feet. As Mālañcamālā intensely wanted to see it, she gradually got her sight. As she intensely wanted to feed it and serve it, her hands grew. She recovered her ears and her nose; her hair fell in luxuriant curls behind her back. Mālañcamālā found they were on a sandy shore. The beautiful girl proved to be a good spirit, she gave Mālañcamālā wonderful gifts for her baby husband. Mālañcamālā fed her little prince, she made him sleep, she made him play and one year rolled by in this way. The good female spirit had given her a magic pitcher of milk which was never to be empty, but the gods came and drank it off. As Mālañcamālā found there was no more milk, she took the baby and set out in search of it. Her journey was long, she reached a forest, but, instead of a human dwelling, she saw a big tiger. The tiger was old and hungry, he said to Mālañcamālā that, though he was sorry, he had to eat the baby. The girl begged him to eat herself, but to spare her husband. When the tiger learnt they were alone and stranded in such a dangerous place, he had pity on them. He told Mālañcamālā to stay with his family. The tigress, his wife, suckled the baby prince.

Five years elapsed in the forest. The prince, whose name was Candramānik[205], had grown up. Mālañcamālā was deeply affectionate to the tiger and his wife, she would call them uncle and aunt, but she felt it was time to go and give her young husband a tutor. It was a painful separation for them all and Mālañcamālā took leave with tears.

[205] *Candramānik*, the 'moon-ruby', or the 'moon-jewel', Bengali form for the Sanskrit *Candra-māṇikya*.

After a long journey, she came near a garden belonging to a flower-woman. It was dry and thorny, no flower had bloomed in it for twelve years. Yet, as Mālañcamālā rested there for a while, each tree became covered with green leaves and each of them had on it a creeper laden with scented flowers. The flower-woman came out and saw that miracle. She saw Mālañcamālā and the child and she believed they were heavenly creatures. When the flower-woman knew they were in need of a place to rest, she invited them to stay in her poor house. There Mālañcamālā settled down. She renovated the place. Three new huts were built where once there was only one: one for the woman, one for the prince and one for her. Mālañcamālā engaged the flower-woman to attend on the little prince. She would cook his meal, but no more appeared before the child, fearing he could take her for his mother.

Mālañcamālā inquired about the scholars in town.

«There is quite a legion of them in the city palace. – Said the flower-woman – Day and night a croak-croak frenzy of crows and cranes!»[206]

Candramānik began to go to school. Everyday he would return with marks of ink all over his face. Seven long years passed by.

Also the king's seven sons and daughter read in that school. The name of the king of that country was Dudhabaran, or 'milk coloured'. The name of the young princess was Kānchī; she saw Candramānik and felt immediately attracted by his charming appearance.

«Was ever a human being so handsome?»

She incautiously asked her seven brothers. The seven brothers turned jealous. They began to abuse and harass Candramānik. They abused him for his poverty, as they believed he was a gardener's son. But, do you remember the diamond Mālañcamālā had picked up near her father's hut? Well, miraculously it was still with her and she was in possession of a great wealth. She would give the flower-woman the money to buy whatever Candramānik needed to contend with the king's sons. She bought for him fine dresses and hired the most exquisite palanquins. The jealous brothers decided to get rid of him. One day they approached him rudely.

«You gardener's son, apparently you are doing well. Now you must have a horse. Our horses will be at seven different points within the range of seven and half miles. Your horse will occupy the last point. If you can win the race, good on you; if not, you will be handed to the public executioner.»

As Mālañcamālā heard the news, she gave the flower-woman few directions and set off in search of a horse. She passed through thirteen countries that belonged to twelve *rājā*-s and finally arrived to her father-in-law's kingdom. Ruin and desolation loomed everywhere; the palace gate was closed and the city looked like a desert. The beautiful horse, *Pakṣirāj*, had run mad: he would kill every person around. Everybody feared him now. Mālañcamālā had no fear.

[206] In a footnote D.C. Sen gives the picturesque original: «[...] *Din rāt hilimili kilimili kāka baker hāṭ*».

«*Pakṣirāj*, – she cried out – where are you? Do you remember Candramānik?»

As the magic horse heard the prince's name, he came close. When he knew the prince was alive, he gladly followed Mālañcamālā to her place. The people were astonished: Candramānik had died years ago, how could that girl name him? How could she catch the mad horse? The queen and the king too felt surprised. Then Mālañcamālā, not so far away, sang a song for the king, saying she was the *kotwal*'s daughter and only few days remained to complete twelve years of the prince's life[207].

«What? Mālañcamālā has saved the city. – The king thought – Oh, what a fool had I been! Alas, I punished her in the most cruel manner.»

The king sent messengers after her; he invited the *kotwal*'s widow to the palace. Days and nights passed, all the city anxiously waited for news about Mālañcamālā. She had returned home with the horse and this time Candramānik saw her. He wanted to know who was the invisible lady in his life.

«Who are you? – The boy asked before leaving for the race – You are always near me, but do not speak to me. Who are you to me?»

«Who? I am the daughter of the *kotwal*.» She said and hid her face with her hair. *Pakṣirāj* proved no match for his opponents and Candramānik won the race easily. The seven brothers pretended to be satisfied. In reality they wanted to take the boy to their palace to hand him over to the executioner. But when they came near the palace gate, something unexpected followed. The princess Kānchī saw her beloved from the golden tower of the palace. People acclaimed him for his victory and she flung down the garland she had woven. The garland touched Candramānik's head and fitted round his neck. All became silent. The princess had given her garland to Candramānik and this implied marriage, thus was the law. The king was immediately informed. He called his councillors and asked them whether the law permitted the wedding of the king's daughter with a gardener's son. Apparently it was possible, they said, but the gardener's son had to remain in prison for twelve years thereafter, no alternative. The marriage took place and there were three days and nights of great amusements in the palace. On the fourth day, the seven princes put a chain round Candramānik's head and led him to the gaol.

Meanwhile the *Pakṣirāj* had returned to Mālañcāmalā's place. She was in a pitiful state. She felt miserable as she had failed to make Candramānik know she was his wife. However, when she heard the news of Candramānik's wedding with the princess, she ceased to weep. She felt her mission was fulfilled. The prince was twelve years that day and he was all right with his young princess. He could not be blamed; he wanted to know who she really was to him, but she had never told him the truth. She wrote adieu to her father-in-law with a delicate letter. She wrote his son was well and he had married the daughter

[207] D.C. Sen classified this story as a *gītā kathā*, as above mentioned, a tale interspersed with songs.

of king Dudhabaran. Now they could meet in Dudhabaran's city. The letter was given to *Pakṣirāj*, who left for his kingdom.

Painfully Mālañcamālā took leave from the flower-woman. She felt her life had no purpose now, thus she went to the land of tigers to offer them her body. But her friends, the tigers, refused to eat her up. When they learnt that Dudhabaran's daughter had married Candramānik, they warned Mālañcamālā:

«Child, your husband is in danger. If a gardener's son marries the king's daughter, he shall be subjected to a penalty of twelve years' imprisonment. This is the custom here.»

As Mālañcamālā heard the story, she bit her lips and firmly stood up. She had to rescue her husband. The tigers gave her a magic glue, as she applied it to her hair, she became invisible. The tigers and their whole flock started for the city with Mālañcamālā.

Meantime the *Pakṣirāj* had returned to his kingdom and given the king Mālañcamālā's letter. The king became elated with joy as he knew he had his son again. He immediately left for Dudhabaran's kingdom, followed by a number of men. When he reached the place, he heard the flower-woman crying and singing a sad song. Thus he learnt his son was in chains. He sent a message to Dudhabaran saying to give him back his son and also to send his daughter-in-law to his camp. Dudhabaran's reply was: «Come and fight».

The king attacked the city, but Dudhabaran's army was stronger. His attempt failed and he became prisoner. In the prison stood Mālañcamālā, invisible to all. There her husband lay in the dust under a heavy chain, reduced to half his normal weight. She refrained from weeping. She had nothing with her, thus she took up the iron chain and tried her best to break it by her teeth. Loosing all her teeth, towards the end of the night she broke the four-fold chain. Blood streamed forth from her gums; she realized she had made it, then she fainted. Candramānik now awoke. He could not see Mālañcamālā lying there unconscious and invisible. He found, however, that the chain was broken and hastily he rose up and forced the door. He was surrounded by a halo of light and the tigers recognized him in no time.

«Very well – the old tiger said – Now our little friend is free. Let us go and eat up all the inmates of Dudhabaran's palace».

The tigers attacked the palace, they killed and devoured all the living things, animal and humans alike. They ate up Dudhabaran and his seven sons and were about to kill the princess Kānchī, when Mālañcamālā, come back to her senses, ran like a mad in between.

«What are you doing, uncle? Please, don't eat my husband's parents-in-law and their sons. Don't eat the princess, the treasure of my husband's heart.»

The tigers felt shameful. They asked for some water and Mālañcamālā went to fetch it for them.

The princess was safe. Candramānik appeared with his father and his men. They took Kānchī with them and left for the capital. Across them Mālañcamālā

came. She bowed to her father-in-law and asked him what consolation had he to offer her.

«Here is the *kotwal*'s daughter again. – The king exclaimed – I shall have nothing to do with her. Now I have got a princess as my daughter-in-law.»

His counsellors reminded him she had saved their lives in many ways.

«Hold your tongue! – The king said – Whatever she may have done, she is a kotwal's daughter. If she wants audience, tell her to approach me in true dignity worthy of a king's daughter-in-law.»

Mālañcamālā brought the water to the thirsty tigers and hired a royal palanquin. She went to her father-in-law attended by the tigers. The old tiger stood in the king's presence. He told the king Mālañcamālā had come in a way worthy of the palace and he had to accept her. The king's reply showed all his contempt. The angry tigers wanted to eat him up with all his people, but Mālañcamālā begged them not to harm her father-in-law, whom she loved so dearly.

She asked the tigers to leave her, but they did not. She followed the king with his army, she walked a thorny path and the tigers followed her. She remained at the gate of the palace in grief and the tigers also remained there. She wept and sang. She asked uncle tiger to leave her and go. The tigers, then, decided to depart for some time. As the king saw they were going away, he felt relieved. Then he saw Mālañcamālā:

«Why, she sheds tears at my gate, what an inauspicious thing!»

He orderded to drive her away along with her mother, who was still in the palace. The two women wandered about in angst. The mother felt wretched and, bearing it no more, she drowned herself into a tank. Bereft of hope, Mālañcamālā too tried to drown herself, but, whatever tank she chose, it was not possible for her to fulfil her purpose. That night she went back to the palace. The drums sounded every three hours; she seized the opportunity to get in and reach the room where the prince and the new bride lay.

On a golden couch with beddings fringed with gold over it slept the prince and the bride, like two flowers of a moon-lit light. Mālañcamālā stood at the door and saw; she came in and saw; she brightened the lamp and saw; she came near them and beheld them for the rest of the night. She shed tears of joy and, when morning came, she rose up and sang a song blessing the prince and the princess.

«I have brought him up with great pains; a sight like this immensely pleases me. Whatever may befall my lot, a sight like this will ever delight my eyes.»

Every night for three nights Mālañcamālā visited the room. On the fourth, while she was singing her song, the prince suddenly awoke. He rose up and asked who she was. When Mālañcamālā replied she was a servant, he sang a song. He did not believe she was a servant. He had recognized her face. He had felt a thrill of delight throughout his body.

«But who, who are you to me?»

It was morning, Mālañcamālā could not stay. It happened, this time, that the sentinels discovered Mālañcamālā's footprints on the path. Everybody hurried to the nup-

tial room. The king himself came and, when he recognized the *kotwal*'s daughter, he turned furious. He sent her away, in spite of his son's protests.

From that time evil and ruin befell the city. Twelve years passed by. Seven children were born to the prince and all of them died.

«It is all the work of that witch.» – The king would say.

One day he was walking around, when he sensed a delicious scent and a delicate musical sound. He saw soft flowers blooming on each side of the road. He looked at the palace and it seemed to be restored. His seven grand children came back from the regions of death and stood around him.

«What is it?» – The king asked in wonder.

His son told him it was all the work of the *kotwal*'s daughter.

«False! – Exclaimed the king – If she could restore the dead to life, she would first resurrect her parents.»

He had not yet finished to speak when he saw the *kotwal* and his wife coming from the palace court. It was too much for him and the bewildered king decide to go a-hunting to clear his mind up. Misfortune on him! He lost his way and his attendants were devoured by the tigers. Now he wandered about and suffered from thirst. He reached an empty tank and there he saw a beautiful girl with a pitcher in her hands. He asked for some water. When the king was refreshed, he blessed the girl. That girl none other was than Mālañcamālā herself. As she heard her father-in-law blessing her, she felt overjoyed and sang:

«Fortunate am I today, for the first time I have heard sweet words from your lips.»

Great was the king's surprise. Again he undestood how unjust he had been to her. Thrice he touched the ground and touched his head. He begged Mālañcamālā to come to the palace, but she refused.

«I have heard you address me sweetly in this forest, how can I leave this dear forest, father!»

The king's eyes became filled with tears. He felt remorse. He had given her much pain without knowing her virtues. He insisted.

«Pardon me and come to my palace.»

Finally Mālañcamālā accepted, but she said she needed few days to inquire about her uncle and aunt and about the flower-woman. The king was immensely happy. He returned to his city. He distributed his treasure amongst his people, opened roads, dug tanks and made all the preparations for receiving Mālañcamālā and her relatives.

Meanwhile Mālañcamālā had found her uncle tiger and his wife. She found also the flower-woman and all were happy to see her again. She had, however, another thing in mind. She went to the desolate city of Dudhabaran. There she tore off a few shreds from her own clothes and kindled eight lamps with them. Then she sat in the great hall of the palace and meditated for three days and nights. Thanks to the powers of Yoga, she restored to life Dudhabaran, his seven sons and all the living things, humans and animals alike, who had been eaten up by the tigers.

With such a fabulous following of tigers and people Mālañcamālā reached her father-in-law's kingdom. Great was the joy everywhere. Her father, the *kotwal*, and mother had been waiting for her. There was the *Pakṣirāj*; Dhārā, Tārā, Vidhātā and other gods appeared above. The royal drums resounded and the prince could meet the true bride. Mālañcamālā asked the princess Kānchī to weave a flower-garland. As she did it, Mālañcamālā took the garland and hung it round Candramānik's neck. Then she held Kānchī to her bosom and kissed her. For seven days and nights the palace was lost in joy.

Mālañcamālā made Kānchī chief queen, but people installed Mālañcamālā in their hearts and called her the goddess of the palace. The spot where stood the mango tree and the *kotwal*'s house was honoured like a temple. In the kingdom there were peace and prosperity and they lived happily ever after.

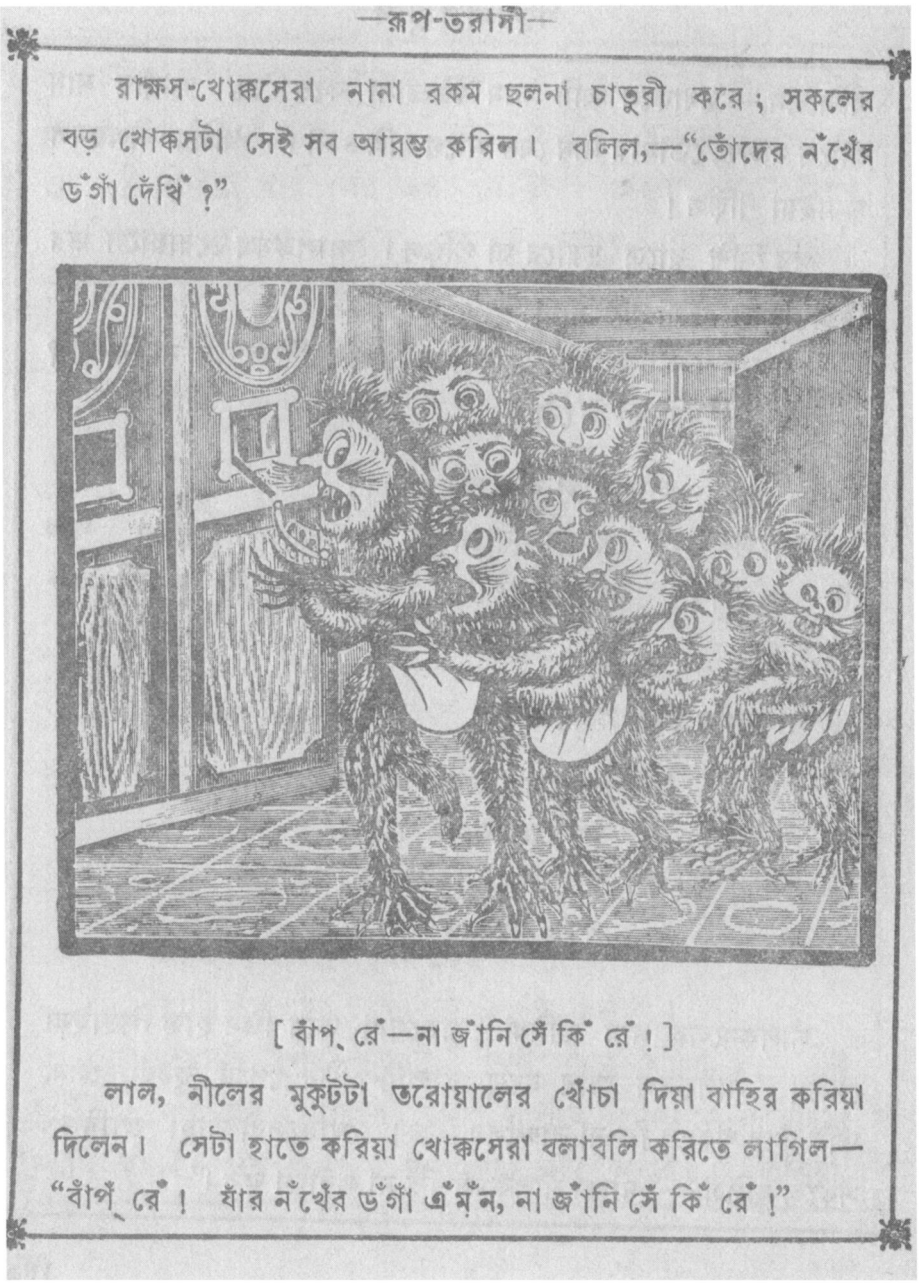

Plate 3: Illustration from D.R. Mitra Majumdar's *Ṭhākurmār Jhuli* (1907), "*Nīlakamal ār Lālakamal*" (Blue Lotus and Red Lotus). Woodcut by Priyagopad Das from the original drawing by the author.

APPENDIX II: The Story of Kiraṇmālā

There was a king who, following his minister advice, overnight would go about in disguise to see how his subjects lived. One night he passed by a window and heard three girls chatting. They were sisters and the eldest was saying she wished to marry the king's groom.

«If I could marry him, I would eat roasted gram whenever I want».

The second sister wished to marry the king's cook.

«With him I could have the first taste of the king's food».

The youngest did not speak. The two elder sisters pressed her as they wanted to know her wish. As they insisted, she confessed she desired to marry none other than the king himself. At this her sisters made fun of her, but things took an unpredictable course. On the following day the king summoned them and the three girls came shaking in fear. The king told them:

«Now I want you to repeat what each of you was saying last night.»

As the girls remained silent, the king threatened them:

«If you do not say the truth, you will be severely punished.»

The two elder sisters, then, gathered courage and confessed what they had said. The youngest kept silent. The king smiled. He told them he knew their wishes and he was willing to satisfy them. Thus the eldest sister was married to the king's groom, the second sister was married to the king's cook and the king himself married the youngest sister, who became his queen. After some years the royal couple expected their first child. A special pavilion lined with gold with a ceiling of white marble and tassels of diamonds was built for the child's birth. The queen wanted her sisters with her to be looked after during her delivery. The king sent for them and they came with great joy, but, when they saw the queen's splendour, they became savagely jealous. They decided to bring to ruin their younger sister. After some time the queen gave birth to a charming boy. The two jealous sisters put the baby in an earthen vessel and floated it on the river. When the king came they showed him a dog's puppy. He was struck with grief. The following year the queen gave birth to another divine looking boy, but again her cruel sisters forsook the newborn child on the river. Again, when the king came, they told him the queen had produced no human child. They showed him a kitten. After one year the queen was again pregnant and this time she gave birth to a beautiful girl. Her merciless

sisters put her too on the river and produced a wooden doll (*kaṭher putula*) before the astonished and distressed king. Meanwhile, throughout the kingdom the voice spread that sinister things had been happening in the royal palace. The queen had not produced human children: she might have been no human herself, she might have been an evil spirit. The king, maddened by those ominous events, decided to get rid of his ill-fated wife. The poor queen, undressed, her head shaved, was mounted on a donkey face backwards (like a witch) and banished from the kingdom. The wicked sisters returned to their homes all pleased with her ruin; but the three children were not dead.

Far away, on the other bank of the river, alone lived a Brahmin. He rescued the children one by one, year after year. He happily took them to his house. He named the two boys Aruṇa and Varuṇa and the girl Kiraṇmālā[208]. The Brahmin's home resounded of the children's cheers: they were of beaming appearance and they grew up adorned with good qualities and virtues. The good Brahmin became their father and teacher. One day he passed away and the kids had to think for themselves.

For all that time their true father, the unhappy king, had spent a life of sorrow. One day he decided to go hunting. A huge expedition was set up with a great number of men and magnificent pomp. But, once in the wilds, they were caught by a raging storm. The king found himself separated from his escort. He had to shelter in a hollow tree. On the following day the king realized he had lost his way. He walked for miles under the hot sizzling sun. He was nearly exhausted with hunger and thirst, when he saw a house. It was the house where Aruṇa, Varuṇa and Kiraṇmālā lived and when they saw him, they immediately went to his relief. The king refreshed himself, then he noticed the three children's divine looking aspect. He asked them whether they were the offspring of gods. They replied they were the children of a Brahmin. The king felt uncannily moved. Tears were filling his eyes. He told them he was their king and if they ever needed any thing whatever, they had only to ask him. Then he took leave.

The children too had been greatly impressed. They had not seen a king before. The two brothers had read that kings possessed beautiful palaces, thus Kiraṇmālā suggested to build a beautiful palace for themselves. The kids worked day and night and in twelve months and thirty-six days the building was ready. It was so magnificent that Vīśvakarman, the divine architect of the universe, felt ashamed at its sight. So tall it was that almost scraped the sun and the moon. It was made of white marble and it glittered with precious inlaid stones. Its doors were silver and its domes were gold. Thousands of trees and flowers surrounded the mansion and millions of birds nestled in its garden. One day a sannyasi came from the other bank of the river and asked whose that wonderful

[208] *Kiraṇ* means ray, or beam (of light), thus the sun can be poetically named *kiraṇmālā* (garland of rays), *kiraṇmālī* (garlanded with rays), or *kiraṇmālākār* (maker of garlands of rays). Be it noticed the association of Aruṇa, the 'Reddish One', with the sun as the brother of Garuḍa, both sons of Vinitā, the daughter of Dakṣa and one of the wives of Kaśyapa, in the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, I.21. Aruṇa is also the god of the morning, a late personification perhaps associated with some pre-Aryan stratum. See M. and J. STUTLEY 1977: 19.

palace was[209]. At the children's reply the sannyasi said that, though beautiful, it still missed something. He spoke of a silver tree (*rūpār gācha*) that produced gold fruits, a diamond tree (*hīrār gācha*), abode of the sweet-voiced (*madhurasvara*) bird of gold (*sonār pākhī*), a stream of pearls and other wonders to adorn the castle with. All those marvels were in a *māyāpāhār*, a magic mountain, at the north of the east and the east of the north[210], but only the bravest of all could achieve such a treasure.

Aruṇa decided to go for those precious things. Before leaving he gave Varuṇa and Kiraṇmālā a sword. He said that if they found its blade rusting, they would know he was dead. After some time Varuṇa found the sword rusted. He called Kiraṇmālā and told her Aruṇa was not anymore. He left her a bow and an arrow in tension. He said that if its string broke and the arrow dropped, she would know he was dead too.

Varuṇa took his way towards the magic mountain. He could perceive the sound of music, the dance of fairies and voices saying: «Prince, oh prince, look back». Varuṇa looked back and he was turned into stone. On the following morning Kiraṇmālā found the bow string snapped and the arrow dropped. She realized that Varuṇa had followed Aruṇa in his deadly path. With strong determination she dressed up as a prince – a coronet on her head, a sword in her hand – and off she went. Kiraṇmālā rushed towards the magic mountain like a fire at the speed of wind. The fury of the elements tried to stop her, but she went on restlessly for thirty-three days till she reached the top of the magic mountain. Suddenly a phantasmagoria of wild animals and demons surrounded her. One called out: «Prince, I swallow you». Another: «Prince, I eat you up».

Hām...Hūm...Haṁāi!
Hām...Hām...Hah!
Hūm! Hām!
Ghaṁh!

Above in the back a roar resounded:

Chop, chop quick,
bang, bang, bang,
nothing but
the prince's leg.

Cymbals clapping, clang, clang,
straw slapping, bump, bump,
tambourine and drums, tom-tom

[209] The dialogue between the sannyasi and the children is written in rhyme.

[210] This is another association with the sun. In Bengali folklore there is a magic mountain named *Pūrvācala*, or *Pūrvādri*, from behind which the sun is believed to rise.

scimitar sparking, chopper swishing[211].

The *bhūta*-s went on menacing, some implored her to go back, while the sky seemed to tumble down into pieces and the earth was shattered. Nothing could deter Kiraṇmālā from her determination. She furiously made her way through the stones, till she reached the diamond tree with the gold bird. When the bird saw Kiraṇmālā he began to speak. he told her to collect some water from the spring, to pluck some flowers from the trees, to pick up a bow and an arrow, to take himself with her and go quickly to beat a gong nearby. She followed the bird's directions and suddenly everything around became quiet. Again the gold bird spoke: he said to Kiraṇmālā to spray the spring water everywhere. Soon the fallen hills raised again resuming their broken stones and... all the princes who had been petrified for ages returned to life. All togheter they exclaimed: «Thanks to the hero of the seven great ages!» (*sāt j'uger dhanya vīra*).

Kiraṇmālā, Aruṇa and Varuṇa came back home with the magic bird. Kiraṇmālā sowed the seeds of the silver tree, planted a sprout of the diamond tree and poured some pearly water onto the garden. In a twink the wondrous trees grew up sprouting their leaves and their gold fruits; the pearly stream ran and everywhere flowers of pearl adorned the garden. The gold bird perched on the diamond tree began to sing the most beautiful songs. One day the gold bird asked the children to invite the king to their wonderful palace. They hesitated, but he reassured them. He told Kiraṇmālā to place him in the room where they and the king were to have dinner. Gladly the king came in great pomp, but, when he saw the marvels of the children's palace, he was literally struck with wonder. «How is possible? – he thought – these kids are richer than me. If only they were my children!» After having inspected almost painfully the garden, the king went into the palace and there he found even more precious things. Emeralds, rubies, gems of all sorts lay piled up all over. The dining room was a triumph of plates, goblets, cups: the table was loaded with an incredible number of courses. But when the king took some food, he found with dismay it was not real: it was gold. Cakes, puddings, sweets were made of pearls and gems.

The king impatiently asked:

«How can a man eat such a food?»

A voice from above asked:

«How can a woman give birth to a puppy, or a kitten, or a wooden doll?»

The astonished king raised his head and saw the gold bird talking. Suddenly he realized the enormous mistake he had made. Then the bird went on explaining. He told the king Aruṇa, Varuṇa and Kiraṇmālā were his own children. He revealed also the wicked aunts' deceit. The king paled at the thought of his poor lost wife. But the gold bird told the children where to find her; she lived in a humbly hut. The children ran to

[211] Hām, hūm, haṁāi!/Ham, ham hah!/Hūm! Hām!/Ghaṁh!/Piṭher upar bājna bāje – «tā kāṭā dhā kāṭā/ byāṁ, bhyāṁ, bhyāṁ/ rājapultrer keṭe ne/ thyāṁ!/ kartāl jhan jhan/ khartāl jhan jhan/ ḍhāk ḍhola – mṛdang kārā/ jhak jhak taroyāla, tar tar khāṇṛa. D.R. Mitra Majumdar 1992: 128.

This is a sample of nonsense rhymes recited (always in a nasal voice) by Bengali ghosts.

fetch her and shortly there was an utmost joyful reunion. Now joy and happiness reigned: the king shifted his capital to the childrens' palace and gave his subjects a glorious time with the most magnificent celebration. The entertainment lasted seven days and seven nights, everybody received jewels and pearls as a gift. After that the king did justice: his men executed the two wicked sisters and destroyed their houses.

They all lived happily and together ever after.

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