



Bengal's Nonsense Rhymes

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Bengal's Nonsense Rhymes

The rich heritage of Bengal's folk literature and rhymes is as ancient as the Bengali people. This literature has been lived and relived through the ages—from mouth to mouth, from mother to daughter and from generation to generation.

Rabindranath's versatile mind found him deeply interested in our folk culture and particularly our rhymes. He became a pioneer in the field of rhyme collection and wrote elaborately on the subject. He held meetings, read papers and discussed the matter with those who found interest in the subject. Jagindranath Sarkar did some basic research in this field and soon appeared on the scene with an excellent collection of nonsense rhymes called *Khukumonir Chhara*. In the introduction of this book Ramendra Sundar Trivedi wrote these significant lines:

... I wish to point out that the unadulterated, ancient literature of the Bengali people is very much their own. Judging from the unique natural quality of Bengal's folk literature and rhymes which has lived through the ages in the oral recitation of its people, has never been considered worthy of being printed—though it is in every way incomparable. . .

Upendra Kishore Ray Chaudhury, a writer of many talents, did some significant research in the field of children's rhymes and literature. Sukumar Ray, his son proved to be a rare genius in the field of nonsense rhymes and literature. A spurt of activity gave Bengal at this time of the turn of the century some extraordinary contributions in this field.

Nonsense rhymes in Bengali literature can be in general divided into three categories. The *Ghumparani Chhara* is of the first category of the lullaby; *Chhela Bhulano Chhara* may be interpreted as

all use rhymes for children, also more popularly known as nursery rhymes; and another third category, though not typically for children, are those related to agriculture and magic known as the *Meyeli Chhara* the feminine rhymes.

Nonsense rhymes are like the tune of the snake-charmer's flute. These tunes really do not convey any consistent or coherent meaning which the snake may be aware of. To the snake it is quite irrelevant whether these tunes follow any grammar of music or whether it comes from Africa or Siberia. The name is only aware of the basic vibrations that flow into its body through this strange and curious music coming out of the magical flute of the snake-charmer.

Rhymes are likewise unfathomable and age-old. They have neither race, religion nor creed. They may have travelled with the same god-speed to the cradle of a black, white or brown child—anywhere in the world where the human language is spoken.

Nothing is as ancient as the child-mind, which has remained in its original form through the centuries. In history, empires have risen and fallen, with adults, both men and women experiencing unforeseen changes in their life-patterns. But whatever the change in the social set-up, the same "old" child is born just as he was born a thousand years ago. He opens his eyes with the same twinkle, bubbling with a life force that makes him as lovable, innocent, ignorant and honey-sweet as ever. This happens for the simple reason that a child is the creation of *nature*, whereas an adult human being is very much the creation of *man*.

Like the Hopi tribe of Arizona, a child does not believe in tenses. He lives in the present tense, and the present is his only reality in life.

To a child, nothing could be more unimportant than a rounded-up, realistic plot for a rhyme. The world of the child is something very much his own. When a child sees fantastic images he or she forgets to hear properly; and when he thinks of something, he neither hears nor sees. He can by sheer will remove everything else from the path he wishes to walk on.

A nonsense rhyme never tells you what is true and what is false. It is beyond truth and falsehood. By holding to a passing phrase, or by weaving words aimlessly for the fun of it all, the child appears to be on the top of the world.

The rhymes in question are like the eternally changing shadowy reflection of the child mind on a crystal clear blue lake. The best

rhymes are thus created effortlessly and by themselves.

A child is more akin to the gods in heaven than anything else. He is like the gods with the ability to apply his will at any moment. The child can in one stroke create something as soon as that something occurs in his mind. This makes him so godlike!

You really cannot draw a line between the possible and the impossible in our rhymes. It moves about at will without the least worry about a plot that makes a convincing story.

One popular rhyme reads:

*Bristi parey tapur tupur nadi elo ban
Shibu Thakurer biyey holo tin kanya dan
Ek kanyaradhen baren ek kanya khan
Ek kanyarag korey baper bari jan*

(Pitter patter falls the rain—tidal bore over the river.
Shibu Thakur gets married—three daughters given away
One daughter cooks, and daughter eats,
One daughter in anger goes to her father's place.)

Its all touch and go. Picture a river in spate with a drizzling rain falling all around. Shibu gets married to three young females in a jiffy. The cooking is instant and the eating no less fun, excepting that the third girl gets jittery for some reason or other and runs off to her father's place. She's free to be angry—who cares! And if a feminist comes along and asks—who is Shibu Thakur to practice polygamy? Well, that is where a typical rhyme gets you. No explanations given.

Of all the wonderful rhymes of Bengal, the saddest and sweetest relate to the girl-child. Though written in rhyme form, the theme of these rhymes is always sad and somewhat meaningful. Girls since their birth are a very bitter heart-throb of their parents in the hypergamous Bengali society. Parents are forever melancholy, worried with the thought of giving away the girl-child in marriage to some unknown and sometimes cruel family.

Durga Puja in autumn hailing the harvest season is synonymous with the married girl's home-coming from her in-law's house. There are many rhymes woven around marriage themes. And even when the girl-child is just a baby, the Bengali mother rocks the cradle and in a sing-song voice laments:

*Dol dol duluni
Ranga mathay chiruni*

Bar ashbey ekhuni
 Niyey jabey takhuni
 Kendey keno maro
 Apani bujhia dekho
 Kar ghar karo

(Rock rock rollicky girl,
 Comb on your pretty head
 Groom will come presently
 To take you away in a jiffy
 Why do you cry yourself hoarse?
 Understand yourself
 In whose house you dwell.)



Mothers, like the dark unpredictable monsoon clouds, are very much a part of the literary climate of rural Bengal. Most rhymes have a distinct influence of the mother, and they speak of mother-love bordering on absurdity. To a mother her son is sometimes Krishna and her daughter Durga and she weaves her nursery rhymes—the lullabies, expressing such a deep mixture of love and sorrow that you can only compare them with Nature herself.

Rhymes are really the creation of love and truth. The absurdity inherent in life itself is manifested quite openly in them and it is only the child—the little god of mankind who understands these in their elements.

Some rhymes in Bengali:

*tantir bari benger basa
 kila benger chha
 khay day gan gay
 tairey nairey na
 shubudhhi tantir chheler
 kubudhhi ghanalo
 Ankrabari niye tanti
 benger chha marilo.*



—Khukumonir Chhara

(This rhyme is about a prudent weaver's son who in a moment of foolishness killed a baby frog living happily for years in a hole in the weaver's house. The unity of the frogs who came in thousands on all possible vehicles to punish this foolish son of the weaver, is something of an example.)

*katkateyta baley ami
 ei gachhey achhi*

*jei chheleyta kandey
tar jhulpi dhorey nachi.*

(Khukumonir Chhara)

(This is about a strange creature who gets jittery if a cry-baby is found in the locality.)

*Kanduneyre kanduney, kultalatey basha
parer chheley kandbey baley money korechho asha
Hat bhangbo pa bhangbo, korbo nadir par:
sararath kendona jadu ghumao ekitibar.*

(Khukumonir Chhara)

(In all probability it is the grandma who is trying to soothe the child into believing that she is going to break the bones of that terrible demon who takes away cry babies.)

*kankatar ma buri
beray guri guri
ek hatey nuner bhar
aar ek hatey chhuri*

(Khukumonir Chhara)

(Describing a strange woman who gads about with a jar of salt in one hand and a knife in another. One may imagine why!)

*talgacheytey hushur mushur
bansh gachheytey thana;
kalkashundar boney achhey
Badshahi bichhana—
Nader phatik chand esheychhey.*

(Khukumonir Chhara)

(A typical satirical description of the ugly ruffian who by sheer trickery passes off or thinks he is passing off as Nadia's Fatik Chand)

*oparey jeo na bhai
phating tingr bhoy
tin minshey mathakata
pay katha kai.*

(Khukumonir Chhara)

(An absurdity which even a child may find a bit overdone.)

*ami bansh talar buri, nakey mati khunri,
dustu chheley dekhtey peley, peter madhyey puri.*

(Frightening the naughty boy to submission)

(Khukumonir Chhara.)

aha! kiba meyer chhairi, jeno banshbaganer pairi



aha! kiba chheler chhiri chhand, jeno gobor gadar

(Khukumonir Chhara)

(Cute description of a girl compared to a fairy of the bamboo thicket and a boy to the dark Krishna of the cowdung.)

haun maun! khaun!

mausher gandha paun!!

dharey dharey khaun!!!

(Thakumar jhuli)

(The famed nasal declaration of a demon or demoness saying that—
"Oglo gogle hobble! I smell a human—I catch and eat I catch and eat!")



A Ruffian Posing as Fatik Chand