Chapter Ten

"Our Motherland"

Mapping an Identity in Bengali Children's Literature

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As one of the offshoots of British colonization, a print culture for children in Bengal very conveniently became one of the principal agents of the British imperial machinery and helped to institute a socioeconomic hegemony and strengthened political control. Being an instrument in what Henry Shwarz describes as "aesthetic imperialism," the genre, emerging in the early nineteenth century, schooled the juvenile readers in the ideas and pedagogies of the West. The children, deeming Western civilization as universal, acquired a "distrust of all things that had come to them as an inheritance from their past" (Tagore, *My Life* 6; cf. Shastri 102). But by the latter half of the nineteenth century, the authors writing for children in the vernacular began questioning the norms of the Western pedagogies and their validity in the native culture. Gleaning strands of indigenous history, folk life and popular literature and by embodying them through the literary trope of *desh* (nation/homeland), they forged a sense of a communal as well as a national identity through children's books. As a project that aimed to construct an independent identity and to define a national culture, it was coloured, in part, by the nationalist enthusiasm of the late nineteenth century that shaped the more widespread *Swadeshi* (literally meaning indigenous) movement against the British rule.

This chapter traces the seeds of a reaction that became manifest towards the end of the century when the genre consistently began to articulate a desire to construct a *swadeshi* "terrain of childhood" (to borrow an apt phrase from Satadru Sen) and assesses what may be regarded as a reclaimed tradition as well as a subversive political genre. Focusing on the proliferating periodicals,

folk retellings, and original writings that cropped up as "homely" or leisure-reading books for children during this time, it investigates the emerging idea of a *swadesh* [a country of one's own] or a nation as reflected in these entertaining juvenile literatures. It also critiques the new social roles laid down for their readers who are increasingly projected as the nation's future citizens. In conclusion, the essay touches upon the private and the leisure reading space that was set up by these new children's books in tacit opposition to the public and formal reading areas related to schools, education, and examinations. A cunningly crafted space, essentially situated beyond the precincts of institutional control, it was strategically used by a body of authors to free childhood from its colonial fetters. Thus what was ostensibly a juvenile and a leisure genre became a potent medium for formulating a nationalist discourse.

Historical Context

A print-literature for children in Bengal took root in the early nineteenth century when Western schooling under the British dominion along with the newly imported printing technology was fast supplanting the native systems of education as well as the indigenous forms of knowledge. The new culture of printed books for young readers, initiated by zealous missionaries and developed in later phases by early social reformers, largely rested on Western educational theories. Textbooks, primers, readers, and moralities blended the didacticism of the Puritans with the rationalist and empiricist pedagogies formulated by Locke and Rousseau—all of which had had a tremendous influence in shaping the genre of British children's literature in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. A heavily borrowed curriculum of vernacular translations and adaptations endorsed by these Western pedagogies, together with a growing prioritization of the medium of English over Sanskrit, Persian or the vernaculars, combined to act as a multi-pronged stimulus for the British administrative machinery and helped them establish a pronounced cultural hegemony.

Designed to bring in the light of Western thoughts and rationalist disciplines, this new literature in print was a far cry from the traditional forms and methods of education prevalent since pre-colonial times. *Pathshala*s or indigenous village schools attended by Hindus as well as Muslim children aged five and above came into existence as popular centers of vernacular education around the twelfth century and reached a high point during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (see Acharya; Adam). Aiming to provide the rudiments of a practical education, a *pathshala* curriculum typically involved a knowledge of the three Rs and constituted an assortment of alphabets, spellings, norms of letter writing, moral lessons, multiplication tables, rules of land measurements and commercial accounts. Children also enjoyed and were a part of the oral traditions and popular folk practices and mass cultures

that were vibrant with myths, legends and faiths of earthy, organic communities. The new priorities of an expanding empire under a foreign dominion forced radical shifts in the socioeconomic dynamics of the traditional indigenous society. Education was one of the earliest sectors to get pushed into a momentum (beginning with the missionary activities and later with the British educational policies) and rapidly headed towards an irreversible and unprecedented change. The nineteenth century, therefore, becomes a crucially important time as the gradual but steady swing from the indigenous independent village schools to a completely foreign and integrated (primary to secondary) departmental system not only changed the institutes, pedagogies and curriculum but also revolutionized the traditional feudal society, creating possibilities of upward mobility through the avenues of a new education. The old indigenous schooling system was fast losing out in competition to the English and Anglo-Bengali schools, set up by missionary or private enterprises, and later to the government or the aided schools, as more and more native parents sought—and were even desperate—for their wards to acquire an English education (Roy; Acharya). This eagerness, coupled with circumstantial advantage of the advent of print in an already literate culture, tremendously accelerated the demands of books for young learners. The fact that "the [Serampore] Mission Press alone between the years 1817 and 1821, had printed 47946 copies of 12 works" and that "5000 copies of a single title: *Nitikatha* 1st ed. (1820)" were printed can indeed be taken as markers to two ascending graphs—one, the brisk book production under a pressing necessity for school books, and second, a growing demand for this "new" education among the natives (Khan 206).

The foreign culture for children, consisting of printed books, new systems of education and modern forms of knowledge, largely displaced, especially in the urban areas, the earlier cultures of childhood and changed the very fabric of the elite and middle-class society for generations to come. In nineteenth-century Bengal, child, childhood and children's literature were recast and remolded in the socio-cultural flux that ensued from the debates of tradition, colonialism and reclamation. This reformation and radical change were fraught with complex anxieties that infected both the children and their guardians. Ashis Nandy notes that

> with greater and more intense cross-cultural contacts, childhood now more frequently becomes a battleground of cultures . . . the Indian middle class child became, under the growing cultural impact of British rule, the arena in which the battle for the minds of men was fought between the East and the West, the old and the new, and the intrinsic and the imposed. (Nandy 65)

As the newly established print genre of Bengali children's literature passed through its strange cross-cultural infancy, it started negotiating the limits of this

imposed alienation. By the latter half of the nineteenth century authors writing for children in the vernacular began questioning the norms of the Western pedagogies and their validity in the native culture. The protracted urge in the face of such an estrangement with one's roots was a profound search for the recovery of the self, of defining a national identity by reclaiming the lost heritage. The popular, which had for the past few decades been labeled as all that was backward and vulgar, came to be seen as elements that were truly indigenous, authentic, and uncontaminated. Rejecting the form, content and language of the Western vernacular juvenile literature, the elites and the intelligentsia of contemporary Bengal sought to give the native children a literature of their own. Around the 1880s, with the effects of a socio-cultural reformation and a literary revival already under way, Bengal experienced a germination of an indigenous pride and manifestations of a nascent nationalist spirit. It was during this time that the genre of juvenile literature too began to be reshaped with a new vision. In contrast to the earlier utilitarian and disciplinarian textbooks that were read as part of a curriculum, the new outlook stressed the role of imagination as an essential ingredient in children's books and encouraged a practice of reading for pleasure. Authors like Pramadacharan Sen, Yogindranath Sarkar, Trailakyanath Mukhopadhyay, Rabindranath Tagore, Abanindranath Tagore, and Upendrakishore Raychaudhuri—to name only a few—took up the task of writing for children as they sought to retrieve the genre from its colonial paradigms and pedagogic limitations, to revive the "lost" indigenous cultures and to create an original and entertaining literature for Bengali children.

The Forgotten Folk

Determined efforts to construct a *deshbodh* [a sense of nationhood] can be seen in the persistent ways through which the late-nineteenth-century children's writers sought to recover the popular oral literature of their forgotten childhoods. Not only did they repeatedly relive and recollect the nostalgia of those "ideal" childhoods in their memoirs, autobiographies, and other nonfictional writings, they also consciously absorbed folk motifs and plot variants in their original writings for children.

Reverend Lal Behari Day mentions a "Shambhu's mother" in his preface to *Folk Tales of Bengal* (1883), from whom, as a little boy, he had heard thousands of fairy tales. In his memoirs Rabindranath Tagore writes about the absurd yarns told to him by Abdul the fisherman and fondly recaptures the magic of Tinkari Dashi's bedtime fairy tales and the hair-raising thrills he had experienced when hearing of bandits and robbers from a Jessore-based servant.[1] He laments that "These days little boys don't hear fairy tales from the women any more, they have to read them on their own from printed books. Pickles and chutneys have to be bought from the New Market in glass jars sealed with wax" (*My Boyhood* 48). Hemendraprasad Ghosh in *Ashare Galpa* [Absurd Tales,1901] rues that with the

advent of English education children are losing touch with the indigenous folktales that form a part of the cultural history of any nation. When Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's *Thakurmar Jhuli* [Grandmother's Bag: The Fairy Tales of Bengal]—perhaps the most acclaimed of all anthologies of Bengali fairy tales—was published in 1907, Rabindranath Tagore's elaborate introduction projected the volume not simply as an archive of national treasures that were fading into oblivion but most importantly, as an exponent of an indigenous cultural identity that was crucial for overwriting the English influence.

> In our country, could there indeed be anything quite as *swadeshi* as this *Thakurmar Jhuli*? But alas! Nowadays even this wonderful bag was being sent to us manufactured from the factories in Manchester. These days, the English 'Fairy Tales' are increasingly becoming the only refuge of our children. Our very own indigenous Grandmother & Co. is rendered utterly bankrupt. (Introduction, *Thakurmar Jhuli* 9–10)

With *Thakurmar Jhuli*, the folk literature of Bengal, became intricately linked to the politics of *swadesh* and *swadeshi*—in that they became the chosen tool which could effectively fight foreign influence as well as the cherished indigenous wealth that could shape an independent character of a people and of a nation.[2] Following the publication of *Thakurmar Jhuli* there was a perceptible earnestness in restoring to the realm of the children the indigenous folklore and mythology from which they had been alienated in a colonial culture. The drift became manifest in Bengal towards the end of the nineteenth century through a flood of children's books that collected nursery rhymes and fairy tales and retold epics and mythological stories. Digging out the lost treasures of the past and by preserving them in print, the pioneering folklorists tried to recover the nation's immense oral heritage, reclaiming the tales and rhymes that had so long been neglected and devalued as "unscientific and superstitious" by a blinkered foreign culture. Peopled with enchanted princesses and fearful ogres as well as motley country folk and anthropomorphic animals—like the old Brahmin and his wife, the cunning fox, or the cheeky little bird—the archetypal stories, for all their supernatural and nonrational embellishments, were felt to be permeated with a simple faith and earthy wisdom. Most importantly, they were seen to be acutely necessary for the imaginative liberation of the child, whose growth was stunted by a curriculum crammed full of dry factual data, inducing a system of rote. Many of the folklore enthusiasts emphatically articulated a defense of these neglected tales as *the* ideal children's literature, not only because they had been traditionally told to children down the ages and formed part of a cultural history, but because this literature alone could nurture the imagination innate in children and provide them with a wealth of wisdom. In his compilation of folktales, *Sanjher Bhog* [Evening Treats, 1919], Dinesh Chandra Sen, considered a major driving force behind this revival, emphasizes that the child has equal need of science and imagination. Arguing for the inclusion of ghosts and fairies

in children's tales, he denounces the pedagogy that rests solely on scientific and empiricist criteria: "Whatever might be the dictum of Science, it is impossible to shut out the world of imagination from children. They have been traveling that realm since the beginning of time" (Sen i).

The Bengali *Kunstmärchen* or the literary fairy tale also grew into a popular children's genre during this time through a series of original stories that were fashioned out of familiar folktale plots and crafted with traditional motifs. Abanindranath Tagore, one of the canons of Bengali children's literature, writing at the end of the century, takes the characters, motifs, events, and elements from the whimsical world of the traditional nursery rhymes to create a land of little boys in his literary fairy tale *Kshirer Putul* [The Cheese Doll, 1896]:

> It was a new land, a dream kingdom! Here one could run and play all the while—here there were no schools, no teachers, no canes. Across the deep dark waters of the still lake there lies a jungle of reeds, and beyond that, unending stretches of moorlands merge with the far horizons. Then there are dense groves of mango and jackfruit trees—their branches crowded with long-tailed parrots; there the round-eyed carp swims in the river and clouds of mosquitoes throng the arum bushes. Here the forest-dwelling aunt stays at the end of the woods, making sweets of puffed rice and nymphs frolic in the pomegranate tree. (A. Tagore 98)

His imagination rides on nostalgia as he fabricates a "fictional" and yet an "authentic" Bengal filled with its native folklore and legendary landscapes. Trailakyanath Mukhopadhyay's *Kankabati* (1892), Gnanadanandini Devi's *Sat Bhai Champa,* and *Tak Duma-dum-dum* (both published around 1910) and Upendrakishore Raychaudhuri's *Tuntunir boi* [The Tailor Bird's Stories, 1910] were all reconstructions of traditional folktales. Asitkumar Halder's two anthologies of folktales for children *Hoder Galpa* [Stories of the Ho Tribe, 1921] and *Buno Gappo* [Wild Yarns, 1922] were sourced from the stories collected by his father in person from the people of the Ho tribe. Along with the tales, there was a new interest in the people—the fabricators and tellers of these wonderful tales—in their social history and culture, in knowing closely the "folk" of the nation. *Ho-der Galpa* began with an introduction to the ways and manners of the Ho tribe. Similarly, Nagendranath Gangopadhyay's *Udalburor Saotali Galpa* [Santhali Stories by Old Udal] was prefaced with sections like "Who Is Old Udal?" and "About the Santhals." In tune with the book's cover illustration showing an old man perched on his haunches (a way of sitting that is visibly distinct from the Western/urban elitist culture) animatedly telling tales to eager children around him, the preface firmly established Udal, and not the compiler, as the narrator: "My part is only limited to putting these tales in script; Udal, an old Santhal is the story-teller here. His oral medium suits the tales much more [than any written word can]" (Gangopadhyay) (Figure 10.1).

Figure 10.1 Cover illustration, Nagendranath Gangopadhyay, *Udal-buror Saotali Galpa*, 1921.

The emphasis here—as also in the numerous anthologies which often drew their names from their household tellers—like *Rangadidir Rupkatha* [Rangadidi's Fairy Tales, 1905], *Thakurdadar Jhuli* [Grandfather's Sack, 1908], *Pishimar Galpa* [Aunt's Stories, 1913], *Paruldidir Galpa* [Paruldidi's Stories, n.d.], *Bamundidir Rupkatha* [The Cook's Fairy Tales, 1926], or *Hoder*

Galpa—is on the innate art of storytelling that belongs to the Udals, the grannies and the aunts over the years. It is instinctive and natural, steeped in an ancient tradition, suffusing the people's cultural memory. It is therefore implicitly in opposition to and undeniably valued as dearer than anything acquired or cultivated—the qualities usually associated with the pedagogies of empiricist knowledge. The binary is between the foreign textbook knowledge acquired with perseverance and effort and the intrinsic traditions that are inherited by birth. They nourish the child like the mother's milk and become the very rhythm of its breath and speech. Thus they offer a rare and inviolate space—that which cannot be seized by any foreign power and remain genuinely one's own.

Didimar Galpa [Grandmother's Stories, 1913], *Shanjher Katha* [Twilight Tales, 1919], *Thakurmar Jhola* [Grandmother's Pouch, 1921], *Thakurdadar Rupkatha* [Grandpa's Tales, 1922], *Chhoto Chhoto Galpa* [Little Tales,1923] are lovingly nostalgic about the lost tradition of oral storytelling that children used to enjoy in every household. Rejecting the "Englishman's Bengali," which was unnatural, unidiomatic and necessarily foreign, the new writings for children, in contrast, radically broke from the formal rigidities of *sadhu bhasha* or written Bengali. Consciously trying to replicate the oral speech patterns, these children's stories played up the conversational elements through profuse use of rhythmic speech, rustic idioms, and rhymed intonations. The authors are deeply anxious about capturing these oral narratives in print and are careful to keep intact that intimate colloquy of the personal voice in them. For this the authors resorted to their own households and childhoods, to the remnants of folk culture percolated to them through the 'uncontaminated' sectors of the colonised society: to the rustic tales told at bedtimes or at leisure by grandmothers, aunts or nurses.

In this rush of indigenous culture that flowed into Bengali children's books towards the end of the century, no less important were the *Puranic* tales. These mythologies and religious narratives had traditionally been part of a practicing folk culture and were carried on through festivals, rituals and popular entertainments like *kathakata, panchali* and *jatra*. While the first was a popular form of itinerant folk theatre, the latter were storytelling sessions among rustic communities, with the stories varying from the epics *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat* to religious ballads (Ghosh). It was therefore not surprising that at a time of formulating an indigenous culture, these traditional narratives began to be drawn out to be retold in printed versions for children. Stories from the epics and ancient mythologies began to be published in an array of attractive juvenile books and anthologies like *Shishuramayan* [The Little Ramayan,1884], *Shishuranjanramayan* [Amusing Ramayan for Children,1891], *Chheleder Ramayan* [The Children's Ramayan,1897], *Pouranik Kahini* [Mythological Tales, 1902], *Chheleder Mahabharat* [The Children's Mahabharat, 1908], *Mahabharater*

Galpa [Tales from Mahabharat, 1909], *Ramayaner Chhobi o Katha* [Ramayan in Pictures and Words, 1909], *Kurukshetra*, *Lanka-kanda* [episodes from the two epics, both published in1909], and *Tuktuke Ramayan* [The Pretty Ramayan, 1910], to name some that were published by the first decade of the new century. Between 1907 and 1919, there were a series of children's books on the *Ramayan* and the *Mahabharat*—the two grand narratives underlying the life and culture of the Bengali people down the ages. These books aimed to connect their reading audiences much in the same way as the prevalent traditions of *kathakata* or *jatra* that not only brought alive the epic action for the listeners and viewers but also cemented the community through an "extraordinary celebration of shared emotions and listening experiences" (Anindita Ghosh 34). For instance, *Ramayaner Chhobi o Katha* invites its audience with a prefatory verse which in simple translation reads: "All ye sons and daughters of the Bengalis! Wherever you might be / In poor huts or in princely courts / For each and every one of you I bring a gift." *Lanka-kanda* similarly ends with a verse that draws upon a community, a brotherhood and a nation: "With a truth-loving and moral man like Ram / With brothers like Lakshman and Bharat / Strengthened with a devoted wife like Sita / May each Indian household be adorned."

The illustrations that accompanied these indigenous literatures for children differed significantly from their earlier counterparts that were mostly borrowed from foreign blocks. The strange and fantastic characters of native folklore and mythologies were embodied with an unbridled imaginative flourish, free of the strictures of Western classicism. Famous artists and illustrators like Abanindranath Tagore, Upendrakishore Rychaudhuri, Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, Nandalal Bose, Asitkumar Haldar, Sital Chandra Bandyopadhyay and many skilled engravers of the day had important contributions in translating the imagined mythoscapes and fabulous characters into pictures that exuded an indigenous brand of "magic realism" (Pinney) (Figure 10.2). Thus the home-grown juvenile literatures that developed into a definitive genre by the early twentieth century were communicated to the young readers not only through the printed word, a technology appropriated for capturing the indigenous oral literatures, but also through a range of powerful visual images that sought to reform and redefine the art of book illustration for Bengali children.

The Nation as Motherland

Dakshinaranjan's *Thakurmar Jhuli* was conceived as the first in a series of *Matrigranthabali*, which might be translated as "books dedicated to the Mother." The idea of assimilating the folk and their land in the metaphor of the child and the mother becomes explicit in the comprehensive introduction to *Bangopanyash Thakurdadar Jhuli* [Grandpa's Sack: The Song

Figure 10.2 "Kabandha," Upendrakishore Raychaudhuri, *Chhotto Ramayan*, 1919.

Narratives of Bengal] published in 1908 (later advertised as the fourth book of the series). Countering the notion that the superior literary influence of the West and the medium of print had helped develop a vernacular literature in Bengali, he upholds the ancient *katha*s [narratives] as a

genre native to Bengal: "The *katha*s were Bengal's own, their distinctive ditties were strung intimately with the lives of its people" (*Thakurdadar Jhuli* n.p.). These oral tales, he goes on to argue, have successfully carried out a responsibility that was far greater and more extensive than the literary novels. These *kathas*, transmitted through generations, have not only fired the innate imagination of our children, provided pleasant entertainment for the women engaged in daily household chores and enlivened the conversations of the village elders in their evening gatherings, but further they have been educating the masses in the highest ideals of knowledge and beauty through the diverting medium of stories told in an easy and amusing style. The book, being a gleaning of these indigenous *geetkatha*s or song-narratives that had been inherent in Bengali tradition, is therefore fittingly dedicated to the Motherland: "In the dust of Mother-Bengal's mead / I found this pipe to play / My rustic sack of homespun cloth in her hands I lay" (*Thakurdadar Jhuli* n.p.).

In the larger context of the patriotic discourse "that came to constitute a significant domain in Bengali literature," Tanika Sarkar notes the rise of the "concept of the Motherland—Deshmata" as a strategic "principle and cultural artefact" (2011). Tracing the metaphor of the loving child and the worshipped mother back to devotional songs of mother deities, she says, "For Bengalis, accustomed to the worship of a variety of female cults, emotional resonances connected with an enslaved mother figure tended to be particularly powerful . . ." (T. Sarkar 2011). Also, in sharp contrast to the very masculine public school image of the dominant British power (by whom the Bengalis were often mocked as a weak and effeminate race), Bengali nationalism chose to erect a Mother-figure, bringing into play the diametrically opposite ideologies of natural kinship, femininity and love. She is not only the *Deshmata* or the Motherland; she is often personalized as the *Grihalakshmi* or the archetypal Bengali housewife traditionally identified with the goddess of wealth and bounty. It is this image of the *Annapurna* (goddess symbolising plenitude, literally meaning one "laden with rice"), the omnipotent giver, ever rich, ever blessing, who often resurfaces as a metaphor for the fertile Motherland in children's literature (Figure 10.3). An issue of *Balak* [The Child, 1885], a children's periodical operated by the Tagores, describing *Poush-parban*—the Bengali festival celebrating a full harvest—is replete with the resonances of a fertile femininity that is synonymous with harmony, hospitability and grace.

> [Her] fields are storehouses of perpetual wealth, the sugarcane and date trees shower you with sweetness, with the beauty of her blue sky, green meadows and the creepers ever-laden with fruits and flowers, Mother-Bengal is always embracing you. . . . Poush-parbans reveal that the women in our households are truly the daughters of Lakshmi [goddess of wealth and prosperity] (*Balak* 1:11).

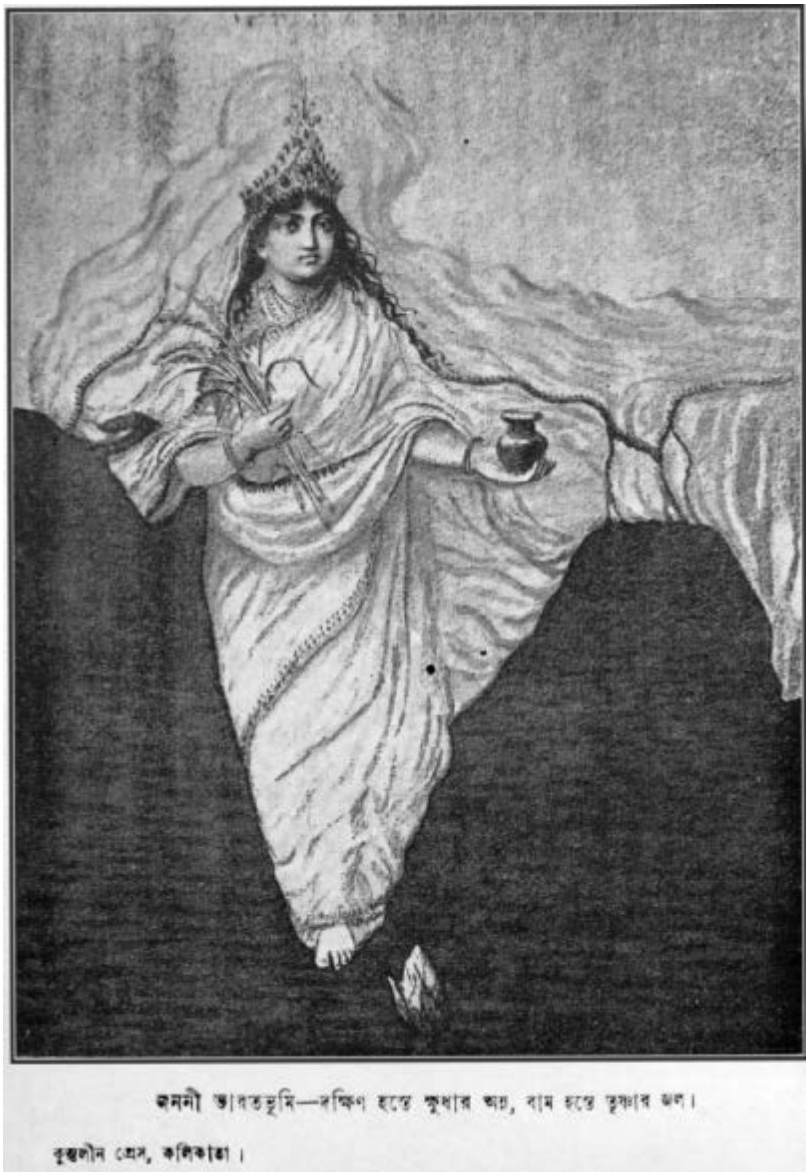

Figure 10.3 "Janani Bharatbhumi" (illustration for the poem "Bharatmata" [Mother India] bearing hunger-satiating rice grains in her right hand and thirst-quenching water in her left). Yogindranath Sarkar, *Chhobi o Kabita* [Pictures and Pomes], Part I, 1914.

An earlier issue of the journal prints the nationalist song "Bande Mataram" [Hymn to Motherland] popularized by Bankimchandra's novel *Anandamath* (*Balak* 1:2). The accompanying litho print depicts a young female figure with children sprawling about her amidst a rich arcadia. She is the opulent Motherland, who is "nourished by the goodness of waters, heaped with sweet fruits, cooled by zephyrs and lush with crops" (Figure 10.4).

Figure 10.4 Illustration, "Bande Mataram," Gnanadanandini Devi, ed. *Balak* (1.1), 1885.

The Motherland is thus strategically identified with rural imageries, profoundly symbolic not only in its fertile and virginal qualities, but also in its conventionalism and indigenousness. The countryside, in itself a vast space in the map of India, was relatively unsullied in comparison to the bustling, smoke-belching cities and towns—visible metaphors of a gigantic colonial power. Interestingly the literary map of India that became common around this time in patriotic songs and poems also used its natural boundaries as political demarcations. In these and other iconographic images that became popular as prints, *Bharatmata* or Mother India is repeatedly embodied as a mother figure with snow-capped mountains of the north crowning her head and the seas to the south girdling her feet. It is worth quoting part of an article, "Amader Desher Katha" [On Our Nation], appearing in a children's periodical *Prakriti* [Nature 1:1] in 1907:

> Though we constantly reiterate the phrase "our country" do we have any exact idea of what constitutes that territory? . . . What are the boundaries of our land? . . . Steering clear of political arguments, let us see what Mother Nature has to say in this regard . . . her fingers point to a huge expanse—far greater than Bengal—as our nation. Following her directions we recognize the glorious Bharatbarsha as our majestic land. With walls of the highest mountains and the deepest caverns of seas, Nature has carved out the contours of Bharat, making it distinct from the rest of the world . . . this great expanse called Bharatbarsha is our nation. (*Prakriti* 1:1, 8)

Sons of the Nation

When in the usual discourse of nationalism "the country is not a piece of land with actual people living on it," instead it becomes a "Mother Goddess," the people then are her devoted sons (T. Sarkar). It is through this extended metaphor of a natural kin that the discourse seeks not only to strengthen the figure of the matriarch as the commanding chief of a large warrior force whom she nourishes and inspires, but also reflexively to underline the masculine strength that supports and protects her sacred image. Interestingly, the Motherland is largely imagined as the mother of sons and not daughters. The daughters, where they are mentioned, are conceived as future mothers themselves and are cast in the same role of the nurturer, the resilient and charitable *Bangalakshmi*.

Past glory is incessantly recounted for inspiring the sons of the nation, for it is they who can uplift the Motherland from its present state of decline. Gnanadanandini Devi, the editor of *Balak*, appeals to her young readers, "You are our only hope. Pursue foreign knowledge, but digest it to the benefit of the flesh and blood of our native land and gathering

the fruits of diverse cultures, enrich the storehouse of your impoverished mother-tongue" (*Balak* 1:2). A favourite among the authors of juvenile literature was the myth of a nationhood—that of Bharatbarsha coming into being as a great kingdom under King Bharat. Narrating the legendary story of child Bharat (also named "Sarbadaman," literally meaning "he who defeats all") playing fearlessly with a lion cub, a piece in a children's annual, tacitly traces the genealogy of the readers to the great Aryan King: "No ordinary child can engage in such a daunting sport—he has to be a son of the noble Suryavanshis. . . . The boy is Bharat, and after him was this country named Bharatbarsha. . . . This is the true mettle of any son of our nation, such are his high ideals" (*Barshik Shishusathi* [The Annual Children's Companion] 80).

A glorious history is of utmost importance in defining a nation and many of the authors started to frame the yet unsung history of India in their writings for children. They recounted the tales of heroes—from epics, myths, and legends and from ancient and recent past. Rajanikanta Gupta, writing of the dauntless Rani Lakshmibai in his *Aryakirti* [The Deeds of the Aryas, 1883] intended to arouse a noble *aryabhav* in his juvenile readers. Instances of unflinching courage and the extraordinary martial valour of the Rajputs and the Marathas in the face of Muslim invasion were often extolled by the Bengali writers as examples of national resistance and patriotism. Abanindranath's *Rajkahini* [Tales of Kings, 1909] presents a fascinating history of Mewar, of its brave-heart queens and indomitable kings. *Chitor-gourab* [Chitor's Pride, 1921], a play based on the fight between Mewar and Delhi is imbued with high nationalist fervour. The stage is set for the action to unfold as the "sons" pledge their hearts to the enthroned *Bharatmata* [Mother India]. *Biratwe Bangali* [Heroism in Bengalis, 1929] asserts in its preface: "What Bengal needs is history, otherwise Bengalis will never rise. When a man feels his race has a wretched past he can never be of any worth. . . . So come, let us search for our past." The book begins with Satyendranath Dutta's famous invocation of Bengali heroes "Rise and be a man again." Praising ancient Bengal's naval glory, its gallant kings like Dhammapal, Ballalsen and Pratapaditya and recounting the martial feats of its *lathiyals* (professional warriors, trained in a traditional martial art, wielding bamboo sticks), the book calls for a renascence of Bengal's heroism and physical prowess (Figure 10.5).

The "Travel" sections in the children's periodicals display a keen interest in the diverse geographies of India. The extensive travelogues in *Balak* urge the readers to explore and to *know* intimately their native land. They are veritable lessons in heritage, often inculcating a "back-to-roots" patriotism, instilling in the young minds a sense of belonging, an identity that they would grow to love and value. "Nadia Tour" by Srish Chandra Majumdar elaborately describes Palashy, where the forces of the East India Company under Clive had their historic victory against Bengal's last independent Nawab Siraj-ud-daulah in 1757, in what became known, in its anglicized version, as "the battle of Plassey." Being the first decisive occupation by the British in Indian territory,

Figure 10.5 "Maharaj Pratapaditya" [King Pratapaditya], Anilchandra Ghosh, *Biratwe Bangali*, 1929.

it was significant in signaling the onset of the long British rule in India. However, though generally paraded as another instance of English pride and glory, Clive's bribing of Mir Jafar—an army chief of the Nawab, persuading him to betray his chief in the battlefield—is common knowledge. Describing Palashy as a silent witness of that battle and betrayal, the author questions, "the English

heart, ever proud of his race, brims with passionate adulations at the site of the great battle, [but] why are we not affected in the least bit?" The travelogue then goes on to articulate a very different, alternative folk history sustained by the local oral culture. The folklore, as also its crooners, the common folk of the village, continue to bear the painful memories of the betrayal as they lament the deaths of Mir Madan and Mohanlal, the two faithful generals of the Nawab who fell defending Bengal against Clive's redcoat forces:

O dear life!
The Nawab is dead in Palashi's strife
The little foreign men in red coats dressed
Kneeling, shot arrows at Mir Madan's chest.
O dear life!
The Nawab is dead in Palashi's strife.
(*Balak* 1:11 & 12)

In the true *swadeshi* spirit, the boys were also made aware of the nation's more recent and contemporary achievements. Biographies of celebrated Indians not only appeared regularly in many children's periodicals like *Sakha* [The Friend], *Mukul* [The Bud], *Mouchak* [The Beehive] or *Amar Desh* [My Country] but also came up as individual titles or as part of a series for the juvenile readers. An article on the indigenous pharmaceutical factory Bengal Chemical in *Mouchak* showcased the enterprise as a *swadeshi* triumph, "Bengal Chemical is Bengal's pride: funded by Bengalis, it is planned and run by Bengali intelligence and expertise" (S. Sarkar 1:11).

Conclusion

Benedict Anderson, defining nationalism as an "imagined community," differentiates two kinds of vocabularies—that of kinship and home—in the formation of its political discourse. The *deshbodh* manifested in the multifarious genres of Bengali children's literature at the turn of the century appropriates both. The kinship is that of the matriarch with her children, bringing together the people of the nation as brothers and sisters on a familial horizontal plane, sharing a common destiny and thus creating the affinitive bond required of a nation.

Closely linked with the family is the notion of the home. The word *desh*, meaning "homeland" as well as "nation" in Bengali, is repeatedly used with its double layered connotations as a trope in children's fiction. The *desh*, its people, and their folklore are the rhythms that pervade and shape the self: "When the children of Bengal listen to fairy tales . . . the melody of Bengal's eternal affection flows into their tender souls and suffuses them with the spirit of this land . . ." (*Thakurmar Jhuli* 9). In the preface to an anthology of nursery rhymes, *Khukumanir Chhara* [Rhymes for the Little Lady, 1899], Ramendra Sundar Trivedi

locates the Bengali child's "home" firstly in its large kinship, the traditional extended family surrounded by siblings and cousins, grannies and grandpas, and secondly in the nursery ditties and lore that imbue these ties of kinship with overflowing affection. Situating this indigenous home as an extreme opposite of the English "Home" where the aged live unitary lonely lives, he distinguishes it as being permeated by the *rasa*s [spirits] of gentlest kindness and abundant love.

In 1859 in the preface to the first original novella written for children, Harinath Majumdar had observed that the weariness of studying books of grammar, geography and physics often compelled literate adolescents to indulge in the forbidden pleasures of immoral and bawdy romances (99). This emphasis on the necessity of entertaining literature for young people was reiterated in 1891, in the introduction to *Hashi o Khela* [Laughter and Games] by Yogindranath Sarkar. A prolific writer of children's stories and verses, he voices a desire distinctly different from his predecessors: "Though our boys and girls have sufficient school readers, primers and other books of learning, there does not exist a single illustrated volume suited *for pleasurable reading at home* " (Y. Sarkar i). Writing a review of the book in *Sadhana*, Tagore also notes the utter lack of emotion and beauty in the dry educational literature and talks about the importance of books that would invite the little readers to "voluntary reading." He himself had conceived of a novel venture around 1895—of producing a series of children's books or *Balyagranthabali* that would provide leisure-time stories for their readers.

It is this hitherto unexplored space, the space of voluntary, private reading, that they attempt to carve out as a niche within the already defined boundaries of the genre. It is where the child would seek the ancient magic of stories and find the pleasure of reading and be drawn to books; it is a home or a leisure reading space as opposed to the formal school reading consisting of books of advice and information. It is in this uncontaminated space, which naturally has the sanctity of belonging to the self, that the writers of children's tales situated their literature. Their project of reclaiming children's lore springs from "the nostalgic realm of the home"—of the grandmothers and "eternal affections" and their unchanging traditions of homemade pickles from the days of yore. A private sanctum, it has the assurance of being forever one's own. Moving away from school texts and borrowed books, the endeavour at the turn of the century was to harness the "non-school" or the "non-print" culture existing in the margins and to reinstate these traditions in the official printed world, to mark out a fresh territory from within the already defined generic space, to recover Bengali juvenile literature from its colonial weaning and to give it an indigenous identity.

Notes

1. *Chhelebela* (1940), translated as *My Boyhood Days*, Calcutta: Rupa & Co, 2005; *Jibansmriti* (1912), translated as *My Reminiscences,* Calcutta: Rupa & Co, 2008.

2. Around the time of the book's publication, the term *Swadeshi* was the watchword of Indian nationalist politics. Spearheaded by Bengal, the movement emphasized self-reliance through constructive work and following the anti-partition agitations of 1905 became linked with the Boycott Resolution which called for a voluntary ban of all foreign goods. (Sumit Sarkar).

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