

Bengali children's literature

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Every child is a global citizen right from his birth. They have no nation, no language and are not bound to any religion. The fact that just by virtue of being an inhabitant of this animal world all men are equal holds true only in the case of children. As men grow old they start creating all kinds of divisions and differences among themselves.

Among all beings, it's the human child that takes the longest time to reach a state of independence. A calf starts romping and running around within a short time after its birth. Tiger cubs too learn to hide behind bushes within just six months. Among the bipeds, even the children of our immediate ancestors -the chimpanzees learn to swing from tree branches within just six months of leaving their mothers' lap. But a human child keeps lying helplessly for months on after its birth. He is neither able to arrange for his food, nor protect himself. For these necessities, he remains completely dependent on his father, mother or any other guardian. In time of need, all he can do to attract their attention is just cry.

During this prolonged childhood, not only does a child's physical organs develop, but his intellect also starts maturing. It is for this very long childhood alone that human beings remain far superior to other animals as regards to their imaginative power, analytical thinking, and reasoning. Just as a child begins to get familiar with some basic fundamental things like fire, water, summer and winter from the people surrounding him, so also he gets to learn his language from his mother, father or someone who fills the role of a mother. Its within this language itself that that the child first finds the seed of some story or the other. Along with language, the child's imaginative power grows, his thirst for a story also increases. Its often the case that a child who refuses to eat, does so only when someone reads out a story to him. Even a disobedient child and his tantrums can be tamed by just telling a story. Besides, a bed-side story is a must to put a child to sleep. He doesn't even tire out hearing the same story again and again.

Earlier, when joint families were prevalent in our society, it was usually the grandfather or grandmother who were the main storytellers. It is of course natural for parents to remain busy. Just as these aged people found great joy in

carrying their grandchildren in their lap and telling them all kinds of tales, in the same way these children too began to get a feel of life and the outside world from those stories. That is why for a long time, these stories were created and even spread around orally. Many of such stories have been handed down through generations. It is because of this that in almost all languages of the world, one hardly comes across any children's story within the storehouse of ancient literature. An attempt has now been made to pen down some of these stories, which till now remained confined only to the oral world.

Nowadays, joint families have almost ceased to exist, giving way to more nuclear style homes. Children therefore hardly get a chance to enjoy the company of their grandparents. But that doesn't mean that their young minds have lost all thirst for the charming tales of fantasy. In fact, there can be no two words about the important effect of hearing stories at a young age. That is why different kinds of picture books were the first to be published; some were even printed on plastic sheets so that the pages wouldn't tear off easily. Nowadays, the most popular sources of picture- stories are fun- comics or cartoons on the TV/or DVDs. But these mediums can engage children only very temporarily. They neither help to build their young minds, nor do they increase their imaginative skill.

Six or seven years later, when the child has mastered his alphabets and is able to read everything on his own, it is then that he feels the need for books. These books not only quench their thirst for stories, it's through them that children get acquainted with people outside their own family; they slowly begin to get a feel of the outside world too. In families where either grandparent is still alive, even there the children nowadays prefer to buy and read books rather than hear stories from those old people.

It's with the advent of the printing press that children's literature began to get written and published. Nowadays, there are many authors writing in different languages who write only for children. Compared to authors writing for the adult and matured reader, writers of children's literature get much less fame and recognition, they do not make much money either. Besides, there are no special awards for children's writings also .In spite of that, the fact that some writers spend so much time writing for just these young minds must be stemming from their great affection and love for children. In fact, all children's literature can be considered as a labour of love. Many writers write with their own children in mind, and consider all other young readers to be like them too.

There are many languages in India, and every year, some amount of children's literature is being written in each of those languages. It is not possible for a reader in a particular language to enjoy or know all those stories. But we also have an advantage; indeed we have two huge epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Within these two epics itself, countless stories remain entwined. And those stories are constantly getting remolded and rewritten to make them made suitable for children's reading. Therefore, any child belonging to any corner of this country and speaking any language knows the stories from these epics.

The Bengali language is extremely rich in children's literature. One main reason for this is that those who are the major writers in this language and who are known for their adult writings do not hesitate to give time to writing for children also. Like Rabindranath Tagore- the first Asian recipient of the Nobel Prize, he too had composed hundreds of poems, stories and plays for children. His nephew Abanindranath , who happens to be a foremost artist of India, has also authored some very exquisite tales for the young. Those stories are now considered as classics in children's literature.

The Tagore family occupies a very big place in the world of Bengali literature and culture. It was a very large and extended family. Rabindranath's own siblings alone totaled fourteen in number, besides there were his nieces and nephews also. Along with all his relatives it was indeed a huge number. The surprising thing is that many of them have been very successful litterateurs. One of Rabindranath' s elder brothers was considered even more talented than himself. He had taught Rabindranath a lot of things but had he ceased to write half way through. Actually, there was always a strong cultural environment in this house. Even though female education was not so prevalent in those times, many of the women in the Tagore family then were quite well read and some have even left their mark in the field of literature. One of Rabindranath's elder sisters was also a popular novelist.

Another contemporary family had also made quite a name in the field of literature and culture. It was the Ray family. This family too consisted of a large number of members and surprisingly many of them have composed stories only for children. This family can be called as a family dedicated to children's literature. And like the Tagores, this family also had a number of women who are well-established names in the world of children's writings.

Just as Rabindranath is the leading name from among the other writers of the Tagore family, similarly Sukumar Ray is the leading writer from the Rays'.

In fact, he still reigns as the king in the world of children's literature. This unusually gifted writer could possibly have easily written for adults also had he wished to do so, but he had kept himself confined to only writing for children. Many lines from his verses have now become like idioms. Many of his created characters are such that just a mention of their names brings back to memory the entire story. Indeed, families, which are not familiar with Sukumar's writings, are not considered as truly enlightened Bengalis.

Translating children's literature into any other language is a very difficult task. Most of Sukumar's writings have a wonderful underlying humour, which is even more difficult to translate. It is for this reason that he is not so well known outside Bengal. But many know his only son. He is the well-known film director- Satyajit Ray. But even those who know him and consider many of his films to be popular Universal classics (like Apu's Trilogy, the Music Room, Days and Nights in a Forest etc), are not aware that Satyajit himself was a writer and that as a children's writer he is extremely popular in Bengal. His grandfather too was a famous children's writer. In fact, as children's writers- they have remained extremely successful through all of three generations. Sukumar Ray died very young. He was only thirty-two when he fell seriously ill and breathed his last, but by then he had already composed some excellent writings. Satyajit was then only two and a half years old. He never had any memories of his father, but he had inherited his father's unusual talent. Satyajit's own writings have always topped the list of best sellers through the years, and remains so even today.

There are many other talented names in the world of Bengali children's literature. But we would like to end here for the present. Sukumar Ray had composed a poem just before his death, and in fact that was his only poem that lacked humour. Maybe he had felt his end approaching fast, for that is the mood reflected in the verse. Later, his son Satyajit translated those lines into English. We end with that quote:

On a misty night in the realm of the clouds,
In a fleeting image of the rainbow,
In rhythm and discordance,
I sing my melody at my heart's content.
Therein lies no bar,
No bounds or limits.
There under the brilliant sky,

The wave of dreams dance in the breeze;
The fountain of an inebriating melody flows,
Flowers of the firmament bloom spontaneously,
Every now and then a sense of bedazzlement grips the heart
And paints the sky.
On this hour of my departure, my friend,
I will say whatever my heart desires,
Regardless of whether It makes sense
And whether it is understood by all,
Today I will let myself flow in the stream of moods.
Who can stop me when my words start to flow?
Today a drum beats in my heart,
Words untangle the maze of words.
The aroma of darkness veiled in light sounds the tocsin,
The messenger of dreams in the secret heart,
The lord of the five elements dances on the stage,
A lanky elephant floats in the sky topsy turvy.
The queen bee, the Pegasus, the brat is a nice boy today.
The cold ancient moon, horse eggs hanging on a bunch.
The moment of slumber draws near,
So does the end of my melody.